

Trust Fall

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Trust Fall

by Anonymous

Summary

Alone and scared, Wilbur grapples with confronting his past and learning to trust his new foster father, even if that is easier said than done.

~*~

A companion story for Guitar Strings and Keyrings from Wilbur's pov set during chapters 5-7.

Notes

I'll be honest, I could have made this into a multi-chapter fic but I got way too nervous to commit to it and cut my plan way back so now I've got this.

I'm not 100% happy with it but it's going out either way so I can move on and stop thinking about it.

This is a companion story for Guitar Strings and Keyrings are What it Takes to Build a Home, it doesn't change the plot or anything and is set during Wilbur's stay in hospital after the fight. It probably won't make much sense without being familiar with the main fic, which is completed and is the first work in this series if you wanna give it a read.

Please, please, *please* read the tags!! They are really important for this one – it gets a lot darker than the main story (and you won't miss anything plot-altering if it sounds like a bit much and you want to give it a miss).

This fic features graphic depictions of child abuse *throughout*. The specific warnings are in the tags – please stay safe while reading and if it sounds like something that has the potential to be upsetting for you, I'd recommend skipping this one (I've got an epilogue in the works that is a lot fluffier!)

This is not a sequel but does rely on being familiar with the main fic which can be found [here](#).

Also, I have to thank my incredible beta readers: Silens (found [here](#) and [here](#)) and Crazy (here). They are the reason this fic is out here today and they deserve the absolute world <3 – go check them out, they are the sweetest people ever and were kind enough to read the early version of this and help me fix it up!

(I am writing with the characters from the Dream SMP, not the content creators behind them. This is entirely a work of fiction and does not reflect them in any way and only serves as my interpretation of their characters. Please don't share this with any ccs. If any one of them mentions that they are uncomfortable with fanworks of this nature I will delete it immediately.)

See the end of the work for more [notes](#)

Wilbur felt himself drifting, mind slowly waking up, verging on consciousness only to fall back to sleep and for the process to start again.

His entire body ached. Wilbur was used to the feeling, had come to expect it. Frankly, it was strange to wake up without a pulsing soreness in his side or dried blood crusting on his bottom lip.

He sighed, settling back against his pillow. The smell of antiseptic hit him, tasting bitter in the back of his mouth and set Wilbur on edge.

If his family had found out that he and Tommy had gotten into the medicine cabinet there would be hell to pay. He always told Tommy that he didn't need it, even beaten halfway unconscious and slumped over on the bathroom floor, he'd try to tell Tommy to save their supplies.

First aid kits were big and bulky. Families tended to notice when they went missing and the punishment for stealing tended to be severe and was generally followed by an interrogation, where they were questioned on what else had been taken.

It was far better to keep a small amount of essentials hidden away, in case they ever needed them and Wilbur insisted they were only ever used if they could not go without them. Still, whenever Wilbur would limp back to their shared bedroom and base of operations, Tommy would be stood there with a wipe in one hand and a plaster in the other.

Wilbur always relented after some half-hearted pushback. Tommy got his way and Wilbur let the kid work on tipping his head back and forth to examine for any particularly bad injuries and clear away the blood from his face gently, muttering insults and curses under his breath in a voice which sounded dangerously soft.

Nights like those felt like a brief respite. Waking up always left him queasy and with a sinking feeling of dread. He'd tried to describe it to Tommy as feeling nervous, the type of panic you get when you sit down for a test you know you are going to fail, an inevitable kind of powerlessness.

He didn't think Tommy entirely understood but he tried to and Wilbur had to give him credit for that. Tommy, at least, always took him seriously when he tried to explain that he couldn't breathe or that sometimes everything just felt too *loud*.

Wilbur stirred in his half-conscious state. He could hear noise, a loud incessant beeping, muttering of voices, wheels over linoleum. None of it sounded familiar, and Wilbur blinked himself awake. He winced against the bright lights and tired again, slowly this time, trying to get his bearings.

Lights were affixed to the panelling on the ceiling, while the window to his left let in the warm glow of the sunset. Wilbur looked down, noticed the bed he lay in was built from a white metal frame, flanked by two tall machines and – oh, that seemed to be where the

beeping was coming from. He shrank back, they seemed to tower over him, two great sentries keeping him bedbound.

A hospital, Wilbur realised. He had been taken to a hospital.

He fought against the rising panic. More importantly, Tommy wasn't here. Nobody was here, just nurses passing by his room, seemingly unaware he was awake.

Wilbur tried to think through the searing pain in the side of his head. Tried to recall the last time he had seen Tommy.

He remembered staring up at an inky sky, seeing the shape of Tommy's blonde curls backlit by the streetlights. He was yelling something but Wilbur couldn't hear too much of what he was saying. He berated himself, Tommy sounded scared, he should have been helping, it was his job to keep Tommy safe. But it had got harder to see and he remembered feeling tired and then he heard something low and rumbling – Techno. It was Technoblade.

Oh, of course. The fight.

Wilbur couldn't believe he had forgotten.

Tommy had gone home with Techno. He was all alone and likely scared and Wilbur couldn't remember too many of the finer details after seeing Tommy scramble to safety but he did remember seeing Techno's fists land. The screaming and cries of pain and when Techno had knelt down beside him, Wilbur could not forget the sight of red blood staining his knuckles.

Wilbur felt his heart hammering, hammering, hammering in his chest.

Techno was big – not as tall as Wilbur and even Tommy had good height for his age but Techno was broad and he was strong.

Wilbur had seen him fence, had seen the way he attacked when pushed to do so. He remembered the force behind his sword as he drove Dream backwards and against the wall. Even when he was sparring with a friend, Techno moved in a way which sent chills down Wilbur's spine.

And then there was his past. A previous history of violence was never a good thing.

The way George had said it, like it really wasn't anything to be worried about, was almost insulting. It was because Dream and Techno had a disagreement and it had ended with bloodied knuckles and Tommy was back at Phil's house and he doesn't think sometimes when he talks and if he pushes Techno just a little too far-

Wilbur heard the soft click of a door opening and froze.

There was somebody in the room with him.

He kept his head down against the pillow, eyes shut and laying perfectly still.

He was good at this. He could pretend to be asleep as long as he needed.

People were more likely to talk if they thought he wasn't listening and while he couldn't escape a confrontation, he could very well put it off just a little while longer.

His heart picked up and the awful beeping did with it.

There were footsteps, slow and deliberate against the linoleum hospital floor and Wilbur told himself that he was fine. That if the person wanted to grab him and shake him awake, they wouldn't be biding their time like this – they wouldn't be careful about it.

Still, Wilbur's rationalisations didn't calm his beating heart. It strained in his chest but Wilbur was better at this than anyone else, he knew his face was relaxed, seemingly asleep, seemingly oblivious to the threat that stood at his bedside.

But the rhythmic tapping of the shoes were getting closer and it filled him with a nauseous dread.

The awful sound of the heart rate monitor didn't let up and it took all of Wilbur's self-control to keep from reaching up and covering his ears.

Beep, beep, beep

Beepbeepbeep-

"Mate, are you alright?"

Wilbur registered it was Phil's voice and it soothed his nerves somewhat. He had no idea how angry Phil would be or what sort of punishment came with a fuck-up on this scale, but if Phil was here it likely meant that he hadn't given up on them yet and they weren't about to be sent back, though Wilbur didn't doubt for a second that they were both on thin ice.

The relief, however, was short-lived as Wilbur felt a hand carefully rest on his shoulder.

Wilbur flinched back so violently that he collided with the headboard.

He opened his eyes against the bright light for the second time and it stung. He couldn't see properly. He couldn't *see* and everything *hurt*.

Wilbur tried to get away, an instinctive urge to scramble as far back as he could and curl up into a ball but as soon as he put pressure on his wrist, he screamed.

"Shit, hang on, I'll grab a nurse. I'll be right back, I promise!"

He blinked away tears and the room came back into view again. He barely caught sight of Phil running out the door, through the haze of delirium and pain.

He was on his own and scared. It was embarrassing to admit, even to himself, but he was scared. Completely and utterly terrified and entirely on his own.

And Wilbur knew this was unreasonable because Tommy was on his own too and, arguably, in a lot more danger. He had no right to be scared.

So by the time Phil returned, Wilbur buried his panic, kept quiet and sat up straight. He would not cause any more problems for Phil, he'd give the man no more reason to want them gone. He could sit still and behave and take whatever punishment came his way without complaint.

"Hey there, Wilbur, how are you feeling?"

Wilbur looked up through his curtain of brown hair. It was a nurse. She was smiling down at him kindly but Wilbur couldn't keep from glancing over her shoulder at Phil. His brows were drawn together and he seemed concerned, which did absolutely nothing to ease Wilbur's nerves.

"Good, thank you," Wilbur spoke carefully and resisted the urge to gauge Phil's reaction. He'd done good, right? He hadn't troubled her and he'd remembered his manners.

"I'm here to help, okay? Your Dad thinks you might have hurt yourself when you woke up."

She thought Phil was his Dad? Was that how Phil had introduced himself, or did she just assume he was because Phil was the one who went in search of help?

He knew that he should probably correct her, but Phil hadn't intervened, so maybe it was okay for her to think that they were family.

On the other hand though, maybe Phil wanted Wilbur to set the record straight, for him to make it perfectly clear that Wilbur may be his responsibility but he sure as hell was not his son.

What was the right thing to do? Wilbur risked another glance at Phil but the man's face was unreadable. He just looked helplessly sad and Wilbur had no idea what that meant for him.

What did Phil *want*?

"Can I have a look at your wrist?" Wilbur looked down in confusion, then noticed the compression cast around his right wrist, along with the dull ache that still lingered. Truth be told, he wanted nothing more than to cradle it to his chest and curl up into a ball but Phil was right there watching him, so Wilbur held it out obediently.

The nurse was gentle as she looked him over. Her fingers were featherlight as she carefully manoeuvred his injured wrist and examined it but Wilbur couldn't help but brace himself regardless. It was an awful feeling, to be vulnerable and weak and completely at the mercy of people you didn't know or trust.

"We can keep an eye on that. Make sure you tell one of us if it starts to hurt, okay?"

"Okay."

"Great! While you're awake, I'll just let you know what we've found after looking you over. Does that sound good?"

Wilbur nodded his head. He had no idea what was wrong, or just how severe his injuries would be. He hoped he wouldn't need any kind of surgery. If he did, then he'd likely be stuck there for weeks. Would Phil bother sticking around? Wilbur doubted it. At that point, he'd probably leave them in the care of the system again. Nobody would want to spend so much time out of work and away from their son to look after Wilbur of all people.

"You've got a sprained wrist – we've bandaged it up and it should heal up on its own just fine. If you're in pain at all, let one of us know and we can bring you some more painkillers."

Wilbur knew he would certainly not be doing that but nodded anyway.

"Your ribs are fractured and we have found some internal bleeding."

Wilbur felt his body freeze up. That didn't sound good. He wanted to look at Phil, to see his reaction, but forced himself to keep his eyes trained on the nurse in front of him.

"Don't worry though, it shouldn't be too uncomfortable and if it does start to hurt – for whatever reason – don't be afraid to say something. Just try to take it easy and you should be up again in no time."

Wilbur felt himself calm down.

Either the nurse was really good at downplaying serious injuries, or Wilbur really wasn't going to die and he was just overreacting. It had been some time since he'd been injured enough to warrant the attention of medical professionals and Wilbur felt just as terrified back then.

"There's also just a few things I need to ask if you're feeling up to it?"

"Sure."

"Right, so to start off, do you know if you have any allergies?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Do you take any prescribed medication?"

"No."

"Do you remember if you've any medical or surgical histories?"

"I, um, twisted my ankle, I think? When I was little."

"Okay, no problem. You found that everything healed up just fine?"

"Yes."

"And have you had any past experiences with smoking, alcohol or illicit drugs?"

"No," Wilbur said much too quickly.

The silence that followed was painfully loud. Wilbur sat still through it all, keeping himself carefully composed but all too aware of their eyes on him.

“That’s great, Wilbur.” He let out a quiet sigh of relief, shoulders sagging as he nodded his understanding. “I’ll let you get some rest. If you need any help there’s a small button above your bed,” Wilbur looked up, taking note of it just in case they’d expect him to remember it later on. “Are you hungry? I can see what we have left from dinner, I’m sure I can find something you like.”

Wilbur shrunk back. Was he allowed to ask for food? Would Phil be mad if he did? He wasn’t particularly hungry but maybe he could save it for later. After all, there wasn’t a doubt in his mind that Phil was beyond pissed off about the incident at school and if it meant Wilbur would be sent to bed without dinner for a while, eating now really would be the best option.

On the other hand, though, it could be seen as an act of defiance instead of self-preservation. Authority didn’t like to be challenged and Wilbur knew better than to push his luck. When all was said and done, he would be going home with Phil once the hospital had released him and while Wilbur hated being without Tommy, he dreaded to think of what would happen to him when the public wasn’t around to keep Phil from snapping. Because Wilbur knew his kindness was finite and it was high time for the other shoe to drop. Wilbur had been expecting it but it still twisted his stomach in knots and came with the lingering feeling of anticipation.

Wilbur knew he wasn’t getting out of this situation unscathed.

Phil was the person in charge of how things turned out for himself and Tommy.

Phil was the one Wilbur would answer to.

“No, thank you.” Unless Phil said he could eat, then Wilbur would have to go without. “I’m fine.”

“If you change your mind, let one of us know, okay? We don’t mind getting you something.”

“Okay.”

The nurse smiled again and then saw herself out.

As soon as she was gone, Wilbur fought the urge to hide away under the covers. Phil walked over to him, he pulled up a chair and sat down beside Wilbur’s bed. He was within arm’s reach and Wilbur couldn’t move away, couldn’t run and hide from him, he could just sit there passively and wait for it to be over.

God, this was awful.

Wilbur wanted to cry, wanted to tell Phil how sorry he was, beg for his forgiveness even though he knew it wouldn’t do him any good - it hadn’t in the past - so he kept his mouth shut. He knew that ‘only speak when spoken to’ was the general rule when an adult was

angry with you but Phil was *right there* and he could feel his heart race and that awful machine kicked up again beep, beep, beep, beep, beep-

“You sure I can’t get you anything, mate? You haven’t had dinner yet.”

Phil’s voice was more gentle than Wilbur had ever heard it and he couldn’t stop himself blinking up at him in surprise. Phil just looked sad and worried and very, very tired. Nothing about him seemed even remotely angry.

Oh.

Oh, he was *good*.

Wilbur knew about hiding his emotions. Acting and theatrics came a little too naturally to him and most adults never caught on as to how he was really feeling.

It was rare that Wilbur met an adult that had mastered pretending as well as he had but Phil played the part of concerned caretaker disturbingly well. Wilbur knew better than to buy into it, to think for even a second that the act would not be dropped the minute they got home.

“No, thank you. I’m not hungry.”

“That’s alright,” Phil spoke gently, and tried for a small closed-lipped smile. “Are you thirsty? There’s a vending machine in the hallway, I can grab you something, if you want.”

A drink really did sound good. His throat felt raw from screaming and crying out for those bastard kids to leave his little brother alone, but the thought of Phil spending money on him made Wilbur wince.

“No, thank you,” Wilbur repeated and regretted the words even as he said them. His mouth felt dry and talking was beginning to hurt, but adding another debt to the ‘list of things Phil would want reimbursement for at some point’ was not worth the temporary relief.

“Hmm,” Phil hummed, frowning at him and Wilbur sucked in a sharp breath. He had messed up again. It was wrong – he was wrong. He couldn’t do anything right and now Phil really was mad at him and- “I could really do with a drink myself to be honest with you. Do you mind if I pop out quickly and grab one?”

Wilbur shook his head, not quite trusting himself to manage a coherent sentence with the residual panic that lingered at the back of his mind.

“Thanks, mate. Won’t be a minute,” Phil smiled at him again and left Wilbur alone in the room once more.

Phil wasn’t angry with him?

That didn’t seem likely.

Wilbur huffed in frustration. It was so much easier when adults didn’t try to play games with him. At least in other homes Wilbur could tell when they were angry, when he should tread

carefully and avoid confrontation. Phil, unlike his son, always wore his emotions on his sleeve – Wilbur just wished they were genuine.

True to his word, Phil was back and at Wilbur's side all too quickly.

"Sorry about leaving you, I hope I wasn't gone for long," Phil set down a can of coke on the bedside table, followed by a bottle of water before settling into his chair and pushing back on the ring pull of his own drink. "I got you one just in case you changed your mind. I also got you a bottle of water in case you didn't want something sweet, or if you think fizzy drinks might be a bit too much to stomach right now."

Phil had brought him a drink – *two* drinks. Surely if they had been bought for him it would be okay to take one, right? It would be rude not to, he reasoned, and resolved to start on the can of coke.

He leaned forward, though with his right hand still secured in the compression bandage, Wilbur reached out with his left. As he moved, something inside his hand did too. The feeling wasn't painful, just strange and Wilbur thought nothing of it until his hand brushed the side of the can.

Wilbur caught a flash of white in the corner of his eye and noticed the plaster across the back of his left and the beginning of a needle that disappeared beneath it.

"Wilbur?" Phil's voice sounded far away, like Wilbur was swimming underwater.

"Everything okay?"

There was a needle in his hand.

A needle.

Wilbur felt his heart quicken and breathing suddenly felt a lot harder than it did a moment ago.

"Wilbur, what's wrong?"

Wilbur couldn't respond, couldn't shake his head or fake a smile or tell Phil not to worry. His body froze up as he was gripped with an awful sense of panic.

He remembered being shut inside the garage of his foster siblings' house. Surrounded by the dark and the cold and faces of people he didn't recognise – friends of friends of the people Wilbur was forced to live with.

Wilbur had never sought comfort in his foster parents, though sat with his knees to his chest and pressed between two strangers, he couldn't help but wish they were back. His foster siblings had wanted a party while they were travelling – *it's just for one night, you can handle that, right?* – he could. Wilbur was okay with being self-sufficient but he was trapped, in a dark room with people he didn't know and they were staring at him, like he was the entertainment, like the obvious fear in his eyes was amusing.

What had he done wrong?

He'd done what they wanted him to. The evidence was wrapped in a Ziploc bag on his foster brother's lap.

Wilbur had been discreet, nobody had seen him and he made sure to hide it where neither Tommy or their foster parents would find it.

So why wouldn't they let him go?

It was clear that they didn't like him. The cruel smiles and jeers were more than enough to let Wilbur know he wasn't welcome but when he'd delivered the drugs with his head down, not saying a word, he was called back into the room. Told to stay in a voice which left no room for negotiation and as much as Wilbur wanted nothing more than to run, to hide away and watch over Tommy as he slept, waiting and counting down the seconds until the night was over and their foster parents would return, he knew he had to do as they said.

It couldn't happen sooner, even if they'd caught Wilbur in the act of passing the drugs out, it had to be better than being forced to stay in the room with his foster siblings and their group of friends. Hell, Wilbur would thank them for the inevitable punishment if it got him out of that bloody room.

Wilbur knew that with their eyes fixed on him, he looked like prey. Vulnerable, unable to fight back. If he tried to attack or run, they'd have him on the floor and cradling a broken nose with a single punch. Who would look after Tommy then? Who would stop them from finding his guitar and slamming it against the floor?

No. Wilbur could do this. He *had* to do this.

He would be fine. He'd just sit there, not make a noise and they'd inevitably forget about him when they got bored and move on to something else.

So he sat huddled in on himself in a circle of people he didn't know and waited.

Wilbur couldn't seem to focus on the world around him and he only registered it in a blur of colour and noise. There was so much noise.

Music came from a cheap Bluetooth speaker across the room, there was muttering and jokes at his expense tossed his way under the guise of banter, but worst of all were the footsteps. People got up to pour themselves another drink, or to rummage through the storage boxes and old furniture, long banished from the tidy living room and left to rot where nobody would find it.

He shivered and tried to distance himself but there was the ever present noise in his ears, that he just *couldn't* escape.

People moving around him, he knew they were behind him, to his side, in front of him if he'd bothered to look up from where his head was buried in his knees.

Sitting there, out in the open, hyperaware of the people around him, Wilbur longed for it all to be over.

He tried not to flinch when they passed him by quickly, he really did. But at some point the fear must have looked a little too obvious on his face and it became a game of some sort to creep up behind him and grab him by the shoulders, brushing it off when he yelped or recoiled or flinched away. They'd laughed darkly, told him to relax, to help himself to a drink, but Wilbur stayed rooted firmly in place.

Eventually though, they did tire of him and settle down somewhat. Wilbur's relief was short-lived though as his foster brother retrieved a thin metal tin and pulled from it a small bundle of fabric. Wilbur looked on in horror as he unwrapped it carefully to reveal a needle.

They weren't going to make him watch, were they?

He felt dizzy, like he was going to faint.

He needed to lay down, go somewhere dark and quiet, drink a glass of water and wake from this nightmare with Tommy rubbing his back and promising that everything would be okay.

Wilbur didn't look but he could hear everything, the gasps and faint noises to the insults hurled his way for whimpering quietly and choking back deep gasping breaths.

"You want some?"

The words didn't register in Wilbur's mind until an empty beer can was hurled at his head. He barely felt the light aluminium as it bounced off and clattered to the ground, but it was enough to get him to look up and find several pairs of eyes on him.

His foster brother was right in front of him and- oh. The needle was so much closer. He could reach out and touch it, could see the way the light reflected over the point- oh God, he was going to be sick.

"I've cleaned it, don't worry." That awful smile was back in place. The bastard knew exactly what he was doing. "Only right you get some too after you'd gone to all the trouble of bringing it here."

Wilbur shuffled back, anything to put distance between them.

"No-" he managed to choke out. "I don't want it."

"Here-" he reached out and Wilbur screamed.

"Stop! *Please*, no- I-"

"Come on," his foster brother's voice was sickly sweet. A rough sort of faux friendliness that grated on Wilbur's ears like sandpaper. "Be a big man – like your brother's always saying, yeah?"

Wilbur's head shot up at the mention of Tommy and just like that, they had him, hook, line and sinker.

“Bet that kid’s got more balls than you. Maybe we can get him down here? He can show you how it’s done.”

Wilbur saw red.

Over his dead body would he ever let anyone drag Tommy into something like this.

Wilbur knew he was fucked the moment he lunged forward to attack. He’d expected being thrown to the floor and the pain that would follow. What he hadn’t seen coming was the stinging in his forearm.

He’d managed to bring his foster brother down but had landed on the needle in the process.

Distantly he heard shouting and could only pick out words over the ringing in his ears. Somebody had yelled something about an “-accident-“ and a “-joke-“, followed by the much more affronted “he jumped at me!”

He sobbed, curled over, feeling his nose run and chest heave, biting down on his bottom lip to stifle the sound of his breathing. Everything came to him in a haze and left Wilbur trapped inside his own little bubble, unable to differentiate sounds and watching a blur of motion around him.

He was scared. He was scared and he couldn’t breathe – he wanted his brother but also couldn’t bear the thought of Tommy seeing him in this state. He had never felt worse as the world dipped out of focus once again and Wilbur was struck with a sudden conviction that he was dying. He’d die here on a garage floor and Tommy would be all alone and-

“Wilbur!” He felt a hand on his shoulder and jumped back. Phil was touching him. He was in a hospital. He wasn’t in that house anymore. “Wilbur, you need to breathe.”

All at once time seemed to catch up with him and Wilbur opened his mouth to gasp loudly, feeling tears prick at the corner of his eyes.

No. No, no, no- why was he crying?

He was *fine*. He wasn’t there anymore. Why couldn’t his mind realise that?

Now he had gotten worked up over nothing and was causing more trouble and Phil had told him to breathe but he just couldn’t.

He couldn’t talk, even to apologise, for not being able to do something as simple as *breathing-*

Before he could spiral any further, Wilbur’s train of thought had completely derailed.

Cold.

He could feel something cold, like ice, except that would be ridiculous. He was in hospital with Phil, where would he find ice?

Oh, wait.

He was in hospital with Phil.

Wilbur looked over, saw Phil still perched on the edge of his chair, looking as scared as Wilbur had ever seen him.

He had pressed Wilbur's unopened coke can against the cushion of his left palm and then it seemed to make sense. It wasn't ice at all, the drink had been refrigerated and the chill had somehow managed to ground Wilbur in the midst of his panic attack, bring him back to the present and remind him of where he was.

He must have looked bad if Phil seemed this worried. Wilbur knew his 'episodes' were something that upset his other foster families and he winced at having put Phil through the trouble of looking after him too.

He- he really should apologise, shouldn't he?

Wilbur opened his mouth but still felt short of breath and couldn't manage to get the words out.

"You back?" Wilbur flinched at the sound of Phil's voice, even though it was gentle. Wilbur knew it couldn't last – not after all that. "Wilbur, I need you to breathe with me, okay?"

Hesitantly, Wilbur nodded and the smile Phil sent him in return eased some of the tension in his shoulders. He was good, Phil seemed happy with him.

Phil drew in a deep breath and Wilbur copied. He tried to hold it like Phil but couldn't quite manage, releasing it all in one go and then bracing himself for the reprimand that would follow.

"It's okay," Phil spoke calmly but Wilbur didn't look up to meet his eyes, too scared of the dormant anger he'd be sure to find there. "Let's try again."

Phil inhaled and Wilbur followed his lead, managing to hold it and release more slowly in time with Phil.

They sat together, breathing deeply until Wilbur had calmed down enough to realise that he wasn't in any immediate danger.

"There you go, you're okay, you're okay..." At some point Phil had swapped from coaching Wilbur through a breathing exercise to muttering reassurances, which Wilbur found to be way more relaxing than they had any right being.

If he kept on like this, Wilbur knew he'd start to buy into it. Perceived safety and comfort was good and all until the rug was pulled from beneath your feet and Phil would drop the guise of caring foster parent.

Wilbur shifted in his bed and noticed the tight grip he still kept on the coke can. He looked down at it mournfully, there was no way Phil would let him have it now after Wilbur had

acted up and humiliated him in public.

“You can hang onto it, if you like.” Wilbur jumped up, eyes locking on Phil. “You don’t have to, or anything! I just- I don’t know... I thought it’d help? When Techno first came to stay with me, he’d sometimes have trouble with anxiety and it- it was just hard for him to realise where he was. He didn’t like me touching him so an icepack or bag of frozen peas would help him, um, figure out that he was safe.”

Wilbur quirked an eyebrow. “And it fixed him?”

“What?” Phil’s head snapped towards him and Wilbur fought the urge to cower away under the covers. “Wilbur, no.” Phil sighed and then continued in a much calmer tone. “Neither you or Techno need... *fixing*. There’s nothing wrong with either of you.”

“But I made you angry.”

Phil bolted upright, the look he sent Wilbur verged on panic.

“Why would I be angry with you?”

“I got in a fight,” Wilbur bowed his head, watching drops of condensation drip down the side of the can in his hand, “and I acted-“ he trailed off, fumbled for the right word, “-*weird*.”

“Wilbur, I’m not angry with you. You haven’t done anything wrong.” Phil leaned forward and it took all of Wilbur’s self-control to force himself to appear indifferent.

Wilbur shook his head adamantly. “I- I caused a scene – I was *bad*.”

“No, you weren’t,” Phil sighed, then he continued in a much more cautious voice. “Does that happen a lot? The, um, panic attacks, I mean.”

“They won’t! I’ll make sure that I do better, I promise- I’m really sorry, it won’t happen-“

“Woah, it’s okay. Take a deep breath – like we did before – that’s it, just like that.”

Wilbur exhaled shakily and Phil nodded in approval. The silence stretched on between them and Wilbur noticed Phil seemingly deep in thought. The man appeared troubled and Wilbur couldn’t tell if it was his fault. He figured it probably was.

“Hey, Wilbur?” He jumped at the sound of Phil’s voice and sat up straighter, careful to acknowledge Phil but not stare in a way which could risk angering him. “Was- did I do something to cause you to get upset?”

“No. No, it was wasn’t you.”

“Ah, that’s good – it’s okay if it was, I won’t be offended or anything – but if you let me know then I promise never to do it again.”

“It wasn’t you,” Wilbur continued quietly. “I, um- needles. I-“ he swallowed, took a deep breath and looked away from Phil. “I don’t like needles.”

“Oh,” Phil seemed somewhat relieved. “I’m really sorry, mate, but the doctor hasn’t said you’re good to get it removed yet. But I’ll stay with you and if you feel like- well like *that*, then I’ll be here to get you through it.” Phil then perked up, smiling widely. “I can take your mind off it, it’ll be like it isn’t there!”

Wilbur knew that logically, Phil was trying to help but he couldn’t help but feel threatened. Sure, Phil’s tone was upbeat but there was implications there that Wilbur wasn’t sure he liked.

When he was hurt in the past it was best to not let anyone know – it was a sign of weakness, it made you a target.

Foster Dads were the worst. They didn’t like vulnerability and if Wilbur was caught limping or pressing an ice pack against his bruises, they’d lecture him on acting out and finish with a promise to ‘give you something to cry about’.

Wilbur shivered. There was no way he’d let himself slip up again. Phil was kind but Wilbur knew his patience had to be wearing thin, he wouldn’t test the man with another breakdown.

“Thank you,” he muttered and ducked his head so he couldn’t see Phil’s face.

“No problem, mate.” And still, Phil’s voice was painfully gentle. “You seem tired, wanna try getting some sleep? I’ll be here when you wake up.”

Wilbur nodded, allowing himself to fall back against the pillow. He instinctively fought the urge to wince as his body ached and focused instead on closing his eyes. He knew he wouldn’t be able to sleep, not with Phil sitting right beside him and Tommy back at the house with Techno.

Wilbur hoped he’d show mercy. They did have a tentative truce but Wilbur had no idea if it’d be extended to Tommy as well. He couldn’t help but remember that night when he was sure Techno was coming after them.

He’d heard Tommy yelp and then his mind went blank, the instinct to protect came over him and running into the kitchen to see Tommy curled into a ball, cowering with Techno stood over him, looking ready to murder the kid haunted him.

Sure, Techno hadn’t *actually* hurt either of them but Wilbur wasn’t naïve enough to think the guy was just going to move on. Techno had become involved with the fight because of them and Wilbur prayed that Tommy was being spared most of Techno’s anger, that Techno could at least leave the kid alone until Wilbur got back and was able to take the brunt of it in Tommy’s stead.

It wasn’t anything particularly new for him. Tommy was a loud kid and Wilbur wouldn’t give him up for anything but sometimes that brought them attention from people who made it abundantly clear that they absolutely hated them both. Despite having a rather large amount of enemies, Tommy also had Wilbur, and as long as he could, Wilbur would do everything in his power to keep the kid safe.

Usually it wasn't hard. If ever someone tried to hurt Tommy, Wilbur just had to make himself louder, draw their attention away so Tommy could hide.

Wilbur knew he wasn't able to fight back, it was a fact he'd come to terms with a long time ago. He was tall but he was scrawny and while he'd thrown punches, they nearly never landed and only served to divert attention away from his little brother. At one point he could remember wanting to be able to stand up for them both properly and resented the fact that he could really do little more than lay down and take a beating.

But after it was over, Tommy would crawl over to him and hug him tightly against his chest. He'd be whispering insults and apologies laced with pain and sadness but also harbouring a repressed, desperately restrained sense of love and Wilbur couldn't help but think that it was worth it every single time.

"I'll kill them," Tommy had said through tears. "I'll fucking kill them, Wil."

"No you won't," Wilbur replied, because Tommy was just angry and hurting and he needed his big brother. Wilbur had long since given up on himself, so Tommy deserved the best he could give, which Wilbur knew wasn't much, but it'd have to be enough. He'd make sure that it was.

"Are you okay?"

A voice cut through Wilbur's thoughts and it only took Wilbur a moment to realise that it was Phil.

He froze up, tried desperately to hold his body still, fighting the urge to cower away even as his heart raced.

Beep, beep, beep, beep-

Wilbur kept his face relaxed, eyes closed, and hoped it was convincing. He'd been able to fool people in the past – even Tommy couldn't tell whether Wilbur was awake or not.

"Wilbur?" -Beepbeepbeepbeep- "I, um, I know you're awake."

Wilbur's eyes snapped open.

Phil didn't sound accusatory - he didn't even look angry. He just seemed more sheepish as he rubbed at the back of his neck and apologised.

It did little to calm Wilbur's nerves. He'd been caught *lying*, albeit, not exactly in a direct way but he was pretending to be asleep and Phil *knew* and that was nearly as bad as lying outright.

How did Phil know?

Wilbur shook his head. It wasn't important, what *was* important was the fact that he was in trouble.

He should apologise.

Wait, why was *Phil* apologising?

Wilbur decided that it didn't matter. Begging for forgiveness was his only option. He'd done wrong, Phil had called him out on it, Wilbur couldn't run or hide or pretend he wasn't at fault. He could only really hope that Phil had mostly forgotten by the time they'd gotten out of the hospital and that his punishment was swift.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur began, because that was the important bit. He needed Phil to know that he was truly and sincerely sorry.

"What for?"

Wilbur hated having to say it out loud, admit what he'd done wrong to prove that he recognised his own mistakes.

It felt demeaning but Phil had asked him a direct question, so Wilbur answered obediently. "I wasn't asleep even though you told me to go to sleep," he swallowed loudly. "I was faking it."

"It's okay," Phil's voice was nothing but kind and Wilbur hated it.

Wilbur made no secret of his anger as he glared up at the man, unable to stop the protest on his lips.

"No, it's *not*-" He cut himself off abruptly.

He'd answered back.

He'd argued with his foster parent.

Wilbur clamped his mouth shut, swallowing a whine.

It wasn't fair, none of it was fair! Phil had been taunting him, pretending to be kind despite Wilbur knowing he'd be disciplined severely the moment he was away from the public eye.

He couldn't help that he'd snapped. Playing mind games was exhausting and Wilbur was tired and he missed his brother but Phil had pushed and pushed until he had Wilbur somewhat fooled into thinking that he was safe – that he had been as soon as he was under Phil's care.

"Was that something you'd got in trouble for in the past?"

Wilbur resisted the urge to scoff. It was a ridiculous question and one he was convinced Phil already knew the answer to but he wasn't in any position to challenge authority.

"Yes."

A lengthy silence followed and Wilbur didn't dare move. For the first time since he'd ended up staying with Phil, the man looked angry.

Phil's body was tense, his jaw clenched and shoulders stiff beneath his shirt. His brows were pinched together as he rubbed at the bridge of his nose. Then, he opened his eyes and the pale blue appeared almost sharp, like he was seconds away from throttling someone and Wilbur was all too aware of the fact that he was the only other person in the room.

Phil drew in a deep breath and Wilbur resisted the urge to cover his ears for the inevitable outburst but after holding it for a second, the man exhaled shakily. "Fuck."

"Sorry," Wilbur whispered. He really didn't know what else to say and acting in deference was generally a safe option for when an adult was angry with you. "I'm so sorry."

"You have nothing to be sorry for, Wilbur. Nothing at all." He was wrong, Wilbur knew he was wrong but he was not about to make his situation any worse by correcting him.

So instead, he nodded his head. "Okay."

Phil looked at him a moment and Wilbur had to stop himself from shrinking back. Phil's eyes were piercing, like they saw right through him and knew exactly what Wilbur was thinking without him even having to utter a word.

Phil was frowning at him, though he didn't seem angry, just concerned. Wilbur had no idea why he would be but it was better than the unadulterated rage from a moment prior so that had to be a good thing.

"What," Phil swallowed and looked away for a moment, steeling himself before turning his attention back to Wilbur. "What would happen to you when you got in trouble before you came to me?"

Not this.

Please, God, not *this*.

Wilbur opened his mouth but his throat felt dry, he avoided looking down to the can in his hand, instead fixing his gaze on Phil's chin. Not quite eye contact but also enough to show that he was paying attention.

"It, um, depends."

It was a vague answer. One that danced around the question entirely and while Wilbur knew that if Phil wanted answers, he would get them, a small, stubborn part of himself wanted to put it off as long as he could.

"Can you give me an example?"

Wilbur wanted to turn his head away, pout like a child and say 'no', if only to really test Phil's patience.

It was far from ideal to be giving the people in charge tips on how to best punish you but Wilbur was backed into a figurative corner.

He could always try to lie. Pretend he'd gotten away with a light smack on the wrist and a promise to be better but there was no way Phil would buy it. Besides, if Phil had found out he was being lied to again, Wilbur didn't doubt that he'd end up back in the hospital as soon as he got out.

"Sometimes they'd make me sleep downstairs?"

"Like on the couch?"

Wilbur shook his head, gripped the coke can tighter, tried to remind himself that he *wasn't there*.

"I- they, um- it was like a utility room? It was small and I'd have to curl up a bit because there was mops and stuff in there too. There wasn't a light, so sometimes I- it scared me and ah, it-" Wilbur swallowed and shook his head. "Sorry," he said and told himself to get it together. "It was dark and if I cried then they'd turn the washing machine on or something so they didn't have to hear it and tell me that they'd leave me there if I- if I didn't behave."

Phil was quiet and Wilbur wondered if it was safe to look up and meet his eyes. He'd done good, right? He'd only stumbled a few times and he told the truth.

After a few torturous seconds, Wilbur couldn't handle the suspense any longer. He took a deep breath and glanced at Phil.

The look that came over Phil's face could only be described as complete and utter devastation, as if Wilbur had taken it upon himself to tear his heart in two. His eyes seemed watery and unfocused and he was looking at Wilbur like he was something worthy of grieving over.

The only person who had ever looked at him like that was Tommy in the aftermath of a punishment or when he'd bolted upright from a particularly intense nightmare.

Phil struggled to regain composure for a moment but when he finally looked to Wilbur, his words were nothing but sympathetic and made of that impossible kindness.

"I'm so sorry that happened to you," the man's voice broke but he continued nonetheless. "I promise – and this is really important – that you will *never* have to go through that again. That's wrong, and – fuck." Phil breathed deeply. "What you went through wasn't punishment, Wilbur, it was abuse."

"Oh, no," Wilbur was quick to assure him. "I'd *been* bad, it wasn't like they were doing it just 'cause!"

It didn't seem to help, judging by the way Phil's face fell and the open sadness in the way he stared at Wilbur.

"It doesn't matter what you did, that's never the right way to treat a person – especially a kid. It doesn't matter what they told you, okay? You did not deserve it. None of that was your fault."

It was words Wilbur had been aching to hear for years and with them something painful clutched at his heart and squeezed.

As much as it hurt, Wilbur knew what Phil wanted to hear. He swallowed down tightness in this throat, the threat of tears which pricked at the corner of his eyes.

“I did!” The words felt bitter on his lips and with them a sense of nausea returned. “It *was* my fault!”

There was a flash of pure anger crossed Phil’s face. It was gone almost as fast as it had appeared but Wilbur caught it all the same and it was enough to send him scooting as far back as the narrow hospital bed let him. He whined as he came into contact with the white metal bars of the bedframe, keeping him boxed in.

“I’m not angry with you, Wilbur,” Phil added quickly.

“You’re just disappointed, right?”

He- he’d said that out loud.

Phil seemed somewhat taken aback with his mouth open but not quite able to figure out what to say.

Wilbur’s own words echoed in his ears, laced with sarcasm far too obvious to even attempt to deny and regret hit Wilbur like a punch to the gut.

Before he could get a word out though, Phil was shaking his head. “No, I’m not disappointed at all. I’m so upset you went through that and for what it’s worth I’m sorry. I am so, so sorry that happened to you at all and I’m angry at the people who hurt you but I could never, ever blame you for that.”

“I- you don’t know what I did-“

“I didn’t matter what you did. That should not have happened.”

Wilbur nodded once, tightly, not trusting himself to speak.

Phil stared at him for a moment before sighing quietly.

“It’s okay, mate, you can try get some sleep, don’t worry if you need some time, today’s been- well, definitely not easy.”

Wilbur laid back down and staring at Phil’s chair. He didn’t pretend to sleep, Phil would know anyway. Instead Wilbur tried not to think, to push the conversation to the back of his mind along with his worry for Tommy and the ache in his body. He wasn’t sure how long he laid there but at some point, he must have slipped into unconsciousness because he woke the next day to sunlight pouring in through the window.

When Wilbur blinked himself awake, the first thing he noticed was that Phil wasn't sat in the chair beside him.

For some reason that worried him and the thought that he wanted Phil there disturbed him even more.

Wilbur stretched, only to be hit with a stinging feeling in his chest. He winced and hissed at the pain, though found that when he settled back down against the pillow, the throbbing was reduced to a dull ache.

Moving too much was probably a bad idea then.

After the pain, Wilbur came to the sudden realisation that he was desperately hungry. He had skipped dinner the night before and fallen asleep without drinking anything to soothe the pain in his throat.

From the awkward angle his bed was positioned, Wilbur couldn't see the wall clock. It had to be at least time for breakfast, maybe even lunch, considering how hectic the hospital ward appeared.

He looked up and through the open doorway, noticed Phil stood with his phone pressed to his ear. He seemed exhausted as he paced and Wilbur could only just hear the harsh edge to his voice, which he suspected was poorly restrained anger.

His first instinct was to curl up and feign sleep but abruptly realised that didn't seem to work on Phil. It left him rather limited with what he could do aside from sit there and wait.

Wilbur glanced to his bedside table, noticing that the two drinks Phil had bought him yesterday were still sitting there. Was he allowed them? Wilbur nearly reached for one but thought better of it.

When he sat up, ignoring the sharp sensation in his ribs, he caught sight of a sandwich in a plastic container. It looked to either have been delivered by the hospital staff or bought from the small café on the first floor.

It was likely Phil's, Wilbur figured. The man was probably irritated at having been dragged away from his food to take a call, likely regarding the trouble Wilbur knew he'd be in with his social worker.

He shuddered. There really was no way Phil would want to keep looking after himself and Tommy after they'd been such an inconvenience.

Wilbur gave it a week, maximum, before they'd be packed up and sent on their way.

Nurses passed by his room, often with a clipboard under one arm. Occasionally Wilbur even caught sight of a surgeon dressed in scrubs and tried not to think what would have come of

him had his injuries been severe enough for surgery.

Wilbur looked to the sandwich again, mournfully and saw a flash of yellow. There was a sticky note fixed to the top. He glanced over to the door again but Phil had wandered off down the hallway, his voice carried though and Wilbur figured he had a minute before Phil would pass his room again.

Acting fast, Wilbur reached over and took the box in his hands to read the note.

He stilled.

It was his name.

‘Wilbur’ was scrawled over the note in black pen and punctuated with a smiley face.

He quickly set the box back down on the table as if it had burnt him.

Surely he’d misread it. Maybe there was another kid in a different room also called Wilbur. Even if it *was* for him, Phil hadn’t said he could eat it.

Wilbur glanced at the sandwich again. It looked to be a chicken salad of sorts, bursting with lettuce and tomato and sitting within his reach. It’d be so easy to lean over and take it.

Wilbur had to force himself to look away. He hadn’t earned the food, as far as he was concerned, Phil was still angry over the previous night. Sure, he didn’t agree with locking children in small rooms as punishment but he’d never mentioned having them miss a meal or two.

But he’s never let you go hungry before, Wilbur reminded himself and then promptly shut down that train of thought before it could convince him to do something stupid.

Minutes passed but Phil still seemed deep in conversation.

Maybe it was worth suffering for later, he reasoned with himself. He’d yet to see Phil actually discipline any of his kids but at least locking him in a dark room was off the table. Wilbur could handle getting knocked around a bit if it meant that he got a meal beforehand and would be able to see Tommy later.

No, it wasn’t worth it. He’d only have to wait a little longer for Phil to finish up before he found out whether he’d be allowed to eat or not. All he had to do was be patient.

Wilbur shifted, glaring at the sandwich. Maybe, if he was quick, he could eat the tomatoes. It’d tide him over in case he wasn’t supposed to eat yet and Phil might not even notice.

It wasn’t necessarily a perfect plan but Wilbur was hungry and Phil hadn’t seemed to notice he was awake.

He’d be quick, nobody would even know. He leaned over, reaching with his left hand until he had a hold of the container. He set it on his lap and went about prying open the lid, finding that it was much harder than he’d anticipated with his non-dominant hand.

Finally, though, he managed to get the lid up and the smell hit him all at once. It didn't hold up to Phil's cooking but Wilbur couldn't care less as long as it satiated the awful pangs in his stomach. He only hesitated a moment before trying to dislodge the tomatoes without leaving too much evidence that he'd tampered with it.

He'd managed to pluck most of them out when he heard a voice."

"Morning, mate!"

Wilbur flinched at the sound and felt his heart speed up along with the dreadful beeping monitor to his bedside.

"I—" Wilbur felt himself flush not quite sure if it was the shame, fear or humiliation of it all. "It had my name on it."

"Oh, yeah, I got it for you," the words hit Wilbur with an overwhelming sense of relief. "I had to step out for a second to handle, ah, *things*, so I left you a note in case you woke up and were hungry. I thought about waking you up but you looked like you needed the sleep."

Wilbur nodded and sent a quick glance down at the sandwich before returning his attention to Phil. "Am I... allowed to eat it?"

"Of course."

Wilbur didn't need any more encouragement. He tore into the food before Phil could change his mind. He had the sandwich finished in under two minutes, ignoring Phil's warning to slow down.

When the food was all gone, he expected some chastising from Phil but the man just looked at him sadly, before reaching over to uncap the water bottle and hand it to Wilbur.

He accepted it gratefully and took small sips, genuinely thankful for the way it soothed the tenderness he felt whenever he opened his mouth to talk.

"Hey, Wilbur?"

"Hmm?" Wilbur swallowed around the mouthful of water and looked over to Phil who had returned to his spot at Wilbur's bedside.

"Do you usually have to get, er, *permission*, I guess, to eat food?" Phil looked to the empty sandwich container resting on Wilbur's lap. "It's just when you and Tommy came to stay, it was like you were waiting for me to tell you that you were *allowed* to eat, when I set your plates down."

Wilbur frowned in confusion. "Was I not supposed to?"

Tommy had always had the more complicated relationship with food. He was a teenager with a rather large appetite and while Wilbur was used to getting by on rations, Tommy definitely suffered the most when they were sent to bed without dinner.

It was the reason why Wilbur had said nothing but ‘be careful’ when he caught Tommy stealing food from the kitchen of their foster houses. Their little hidden stash of food grew and was kept carefully concealed in the bottom of Tommy’s bag. The kid insisted that they share it but Wilbur almost never indulged; he knew how much Tommy needed it and if they ended up at different homes, it would be a small comfort to know that Tommy wouldn’t go hungry.

Every foster home had a different policy on food but the unanimous decision seemed to be that you wait to be given permission to eat. Wilbur reasoned that it made sense, after all, foster parents usually had more than one kid to look after and if they had a certain budget for food, then the last thing they would want is for their groceries to disappear before they’d had chance to use them. Especially if biological or adopted children were involved – Wilbur knew they were the priority, the foster kids would have to get whatever was left.

Wilbur’s favourite homes ended up being the ones which didn’t believe in beating their kids as a form of discipline, though in such cases, withholding food was usually the alternative.

There was a morbid comfort in knowing the extent of how a foster family decided to discipline the kids they took in.

Wilbur also knew he could get by with eating very little. Tommy, however was different. He would sometimes end up curled into a ball on his side, arms wrapped around himself as he endured the familiar hunger pangs and Wilbur could do nothing more than comfort him through it.

It was times like those Wilbur felt his absolute worst. The guilt ate away at him, having to watch his younger brother writhe in pain as he sat there, relatively unharmed as his mind spiralled. He berated himself for being selfish enough to secretly prefer the houses where he ended up with an empty stomach over a bruised ribcage, while Tommy would beg him for a distraction – a song, a story, *anything* – to take his focus away from the overwhelming hurt. Wilbur would always find his head empty and mouth dry but still manage to get something out. It was for Tommy and for Tommy he would do whatever he had to.

“No.” To Wilbur’s surprise Phil shook his head and when his blue eyes found Wilbur’s own, they were unnervingly serious. “If I give you or Tommy food, it’s yours – nobody is going to take it away from you.”

“Even if we’re in trouble?”

“God, Wilbur,” Phil breathed out quietly, desperately trying to restrain the emotion in his voice, as he turned away for a moment to collect himself. “That’s- that is,” he hesitated, “*never* okay. I am not going to deny you food if you’ve done something wrong.”

“Then what?”

Wilbur knew he was pushing his luck but if Phil meant what he said – and Wilbur seriously doubted *that* – then he dreaded to think what the alternative would be. Phil didn’t seem like a violent man but Wilbur had doubted people in the past and paid the price for it.

“We’ll talk about it.”

“A punishment?”

“No,” Phil’s face seemed pale under the harsh light of the hospital room and his eyes appeared almost glassy. “I mean, we’ll have a talk about what you’ve done and think about why it happened and how we can avoid it happening in the future – that’s *it*. That’s all it’ll *ever* be. I want to help you, Wilbur. I want you to be safe and happy and I don’t know what people have done to you in the past but I would *never* hurt you like that. *I promise.*”

Wilbur wanted to believe him, he really, *really* did, but letting his guard down and trusting Phil meant that he would not just be opening himself up to the risk of betrayal, but Tommy too.

Wilbur could confide in Phil, could let himself tip over the edge and hope against all odds that Phil would be waiting at the bottom to catch him, but his history would be intertwined with Tommy’s own. Anything he said about himself would involve his little brother and if Phil ever wanted to use that information against them, Wilbur would never be able to forgive himself.

Mercifully, before Wilbur had to figure out what to say, Phil’s phone began ringing.

The man seemed frustrated for a second as he fished it out of his pocket and Wilbur had to fight back against the instinct to flinch at the mild anger even through Phil’s eyes weren’t even trained on him.

After a second of looking at the screen, Phil’s eyes softened and he smiled slightly. He looked up and at Wilbur.

“Do you mind if I answer this?”

Wilbur shook his head. He found it almost comical that Phil had even asked the question in the first place – he was the adult, he was the one who called the shots, he was undeniably and irrefutably, the one in charge.

“Hello boys! How are you doing?”

“We’re good.”

Wilbur couldn’t see the screen, as Phil had held it up to his face, but despite the slight distortion from the phone’s speaker, Wilbur recognised it instantly as Techno.

He had the sudden urge to hide all over again. Phil’s kid scared him. He was adopted and therefore Phil’s favourite and Wilbur had seen him wade into a fight and beat a handful of kids to a pulp. The very sound of his voice sent the alarm bells ringing in Wilbur’s head and the realisation that Tommy was alone with Techno and without Wilbur to protect him had finally set in and left him with a cold feeling of dread.

“How’s Wilbur?”

It was Tommy. He sounded okay but Wilbur couldn't be sure. He looked to Phil and hoped the pleading in his eyes spoke for him, despite the fact that Phil's attention was very much on his phone.

"He's doing fine," Phil then looked directly at him and seemed almost taken aback. Wilbur knew he must have looked desperate but Tommy was right there, and Wilbur was prepared to beg for the chance to speak to him if it would help. Fortunately, Phil was merciful enough to give up the phone to him without a fight. "It's Techno and Tommy asking if you're okay. Do you feel up for a chat?"

"Yeah," Wilbur said and tried to shuffle closer to the edge of the bed towards Phil and the phone where he'd be able to speak to Tommy for the first time since being separated from him.

"I'll pass you onto Wil, he's a bit tired but wants to see you both."

Phil handed him the phone and Wilbur tried to keep his hands from shaking. He held it in his left, slightly unsteady. He swapped it for his right, carefully so as to not risk hurting himself further – that was the last thing he wanted to do in front of his little brother. From the corner of his eye, he saw Phil watching him closely for any signs of discomfort, but Wilbur managed to nestle the phone in a loose grip without irritating his injured wrist too much.

Finally, after the slight jostling, Wilbur looked into the screen of the phone and saw Tommy and Techno staring back at him.

A second passed where Wilbur watched a look of horror cross Tommy's face. The kid looked distraught as his eyes took in the sight in front of him, bright blue and wet with unshed tears. Wilbur wasn't sure if it was sadness or frustration and mourned the fact that there was little he could do to ease Tommy's worry.

Despite the familiar feeling of powerlessness, Wilbur didn't let himself falter. He smiled into the phone camera easily and tried for humour.

"Don't worry, it looks a lot worse than it actually is."

He hoped he sounded reassuring and that his voice was somewhat level, but it came out slightly hoarse and he had to hope the words alone were enough to convince Tommy that he was okay.

"You're an idiot," Tommy's smile was fond and Wilbur couldn't hide the way his eyes softened. Tommy was smiling. It was tentative and fragile but it would have to do.

The most important thing was that Tommy was okay. Wilbur opened his mouth but as soon as he did, looked over to Techno sitting right at Tommy's side and stopped himself.

Techno was watching him and Phil was watching him but he *had* to make sure that Tommy was alright.

He could do this – they *had* been doing this for years.

Wilbur looked over at Tommy and hoped that the shift in his demeanour and tone spoke volumes where he could not.

With a careful voice, Wilbur said clearly, “How’s the weather?”

Phil didn’t seem to take much notice of the question and one look to Techno showed that he seemed slightly confused.

That’s fine. Confused was good, it didn’t mean that he knew the question Wilbur was actually asking.

Are you okay?

Tommy perked up in realisation. He’d caught on immediately and Wilbur had to fight to keep the smile off his face. Tommy was clever, he was a fighter and a survivor and he did not give the kid enough credit.

It hurt that he couldn’t just ask Tommy outright if he was being hurt but was still unbelievably proud of how much Tommy had learnt over their time evading abusive foster families and carrying on despite it all.

“Oh, it’s fine. Good, actually.”

The way Tommy spoke was enthusiastic and almost dismissive. Wilbur kept his eyes locked on him the whole time, searching for evidence to the contrary. It was too good to be true. Techno hated them – he knew this. There was no way he’d let Tommy go unscathed after everything that had happened.

Wilbur’s frowned. “I thought it’d be overcast, you don’t get much sun this time of the year.”

“No, no, it’s fine. Crystal clear in fact – not a cloud in the sky.”

Tommy’s voice jumped up an octave and he spoke quickly but in a way which sounded almost overwhelmingly genuine.

Wilbur hummed, still sceptical. “You sure?”

“Yeah,” Tommy replied and Wilbur saw the way his eyes glanced over to Techno for a fleeting moment. He didn’t seem at all worried and he looked certain; resolute.

In all honestly, Wilbur couldn’t quite understand it. Tommy was a brave kid – he knew that better than anyone – but sitting beside Techno, he didn’t even look at all tense, or uneasy.

“Mate?” Wilbur turned at the sound of Phil’s voice. He’d forgotten the man was sitting there and for a terrifying, heart-stopping second, he’d worried Phil had caught on to what he was really asking his little brother. “I’m just stepping out to grab a coffee, do you want anything?”

“No, thank you.”

Phil nodded and stood up. “I won’t be long.”

“Okay.”

Wilbur tried not to sound too enthusiastic about Phil leaving but it was undeniable that he felt much more at ease having less eyes on him. At least now, he’d only have to deal with Techno.

Wilbur looked back to the phone and saw Techno move closer to Tommy.

Wilbur bit back a growl. Maybe this was what Techno was waiting for, a moment when Phil had left to show his true colours and really make the foster brothers regret dragging him into their mess. Wilbur braced himself, could feel the threat on his lips, ready with a promise to kill him if he dared to lay a hand on his little brother.

But all Techno did was nudge Tommy’s shoulder gently.

Tommy looked over to Techno, unfazed by the casual touch. “I’m going to check on the garden,” then Techno looked into the phone camera and smiled at him. Wilbur couldn’t help but blink in confusion. “Hope you get better soon.”

“Thanks...” Wilbur didn’t register the word as he spoke, so quietly he doubted the microphone could pick it up.

But Techno didn’t say anything else. He just stood up and left.

Wilbur took a moment for his brain to catch up with what had happened. He was aware of how smoothly it all went but couldn’t quite believe it.

Even when he’d turned his attention back to Tommy, Wilbur didn’t risk speaking. He wasn’t sure Techno had completely left them alone and trusted that Tommy would know when they’d be safe to talk.

“Are you okay?”

“Who gives a shit?” Wilbur scoffed. “Are *you* okay?”

“*Wil*,” Tommy let the word linger between them, a warning as the kid’s eyes darkened and he scowled at Wilbur through the screen of Phil’s phone. Wilbur knew he’d crossed a line. Tommy would always insist that it wasn’t fair for Wilbur to care about him but not let Tommy do the same in turn. “I fucking care! I’ve been terrified that you’d be dead by the time I woke up,” Tommy’s voice verged on hysterics as he fought back against the wetness in his eyes. “You looked bad, Wil - really, *really* bad. You were bleeding and pale and you couldn’t even focus on me when Phil showed up. You looked dead! I could have *lost* you.” He took a deep breath, then another. “Don’t ask me who gives a shit. Just- just tell me already.”

“Okay,” Wilbur tried to sound calming and he wished more than anything that he was there to rest a hand on Tommy’s shoulder. The kid had always been clingy. He still found touch a comfort, even after suffering abuse for years and the very thought never failed to break Wilbur’s heart all over again. “You’re okay.”

Tommy nodded as he focused on breathing, slowly as to stop the rising emotion before he broke down again.

"I'm sorry," Wilbur sighed. "I was just worried about you."

"About me?"

"Of course!" Wilbur lowered his voice, instinctively looking around to make sure Phil was still gone. "You're stuck there with *Techno*."

"Oh," Tommy seemed to just blink in confusion for a moment, then he looked back at Wilbur as if he were overreacting, as if he had no reason at all to be concerned. "He's fine."

"Tommy--"

"No, really," Tommy turned to look away from the phone and while Wilbur couldn't see the back garden window, the midday sunlight fell over Tommy's face as he sat up in his chair, seemingly looking for something. "He's *actually* fine."

"So, what, are you friends now, or something?" Wilbur didn't mean for the words to come across as vicious as they did and he cringed at the sound of his own voice.

"I guess?"

"*You guess?*" Wilbur hadn't meant to yell and immediately turned to see if anyone had noticed. Fortunately, Phil was still missing and nobody passing by had spared his room a glance. He sighed, tried to compose himself. "Tommy, you *know* Techno is dangerous. You saw him beat the absolute shit out of those kids. I'm not even there to stop him if he decided to turn on you! Have you actually forgotten how to keep yourself safe, just because I'm not with you?"

"Of course not!" Tommy snapped and then turned away. He almost seemed embarrassed.

"I'm not as good at you with figuring people out but he said sorry and he was nice and brought me my own pizza and he's looking after me." Tommy paused to catch his breath.

"You and Phil aren't here - if he wanted to hurt me he could, but he *didn't*. Not once. He- he's actually talking to me and stuff and helping with, um, with the fact that you're not here..." Tommy trailed off and Wilbur felt something sharp and painful in his chest.

"Sorry," Wilbur took a deep breath. "I just hate the fact that I'm here and I just keep having these... *attacks*."

"Like when we get in trouble and sometimes you don't know where you are?"

"Yeah," Wilbur hoped the absolute misery didn't show in his voice. He didn't feel sorry for himself, just a painful, burning sense of shame. He hated admitting his own failings. He hated it even more when he was reminded of the times his mind had failed him and Tommy had to try and comfort him until he returned to the present.

"Are you, um, okay?"

Wilbur blinked at the question. Was Tommy asking what he thought Tommy was asking?

“Phil doesn’t care,” Wilbur hesitated before adding quickly, “at least it doesn’t seem like he cares. He was ridiculously nice about the whole thing, so maybe he cares *too* much.”

“Huh. Is that a good thing?”

“Honestly?” Wilbur inhaled deeply before letting it out. “I have no idea.”

“That’s new.”

“Yeah, it is.”

A moment of silence passed between them and there was so much Wilbur wanted to say but just couldn’t find the words for. Tommy also seemed tense, like he couldn’t decide whether to open his mouth or not. Wilbur watched the kid steel himself, before sucking in a breath and letting the words rush out quickly, to avoid having to think too hard about them.

“What did the doctors say?”

“That I’ll live.”

“That’s great but what, um, where are you hurt?”

In truth, Wilbur had been avoiding specifics. It wasn’t that he wanted Tommy to worry about him but he could predict the kid’s guilt a mile away.

Whenever he had gotten hurt, Tommy was always the one to stay by his side afterwards and help him back onto his feet. For the amount of energy Tommy had, whenever Wilbur needed his help, the kid would always be able to reign himself in unnervingly quickly. Within seconds, he could go from stomping about their room to gently pressing antiseptic wipes to Wilbur’s wounds and winding bandages around an injured arm or leg.

The fact that he wasn’t in the hospital with Wilbur would undoubtedly weigh heavy on him, even though there really wasn’t a feasible way of him getting there without either learning the bus routes or being offered a ride.

“My wrist is sprained so that’s fun,” Wilbur swapped hands so he could hold the phone in front of his cast for a second before changing back again. “My ribs are fractured – there isn’t too much they can do there and there’s a bit of internal bleeding.”

“Internal bleeding?”

“Just a bit, I swear, it’s honestly not that big of a deal. I can’t even feel anything to be honest and all I have to do is lay down and wait for it to be over.”

“That’s... not good.”

Wilbur shrugged. “It’s not *bad*. The worst of it is probably the sprained wrist. It means I probably can’t play guitar for a while.”

“Oh,” Tommy’s voice softened and Wilbur could hear the sympathy as he spoke. “That sucks. I could always play for you instead!”

Wilbur huffed a laugh and then immediately winced from the pain in his chest. “Okay, so humour’s probably off limits too.”

“No laughter and no music. I literally cannot think of anything worse.”

Wilbur sighed dramatically, letting his head fall back onto the pillows. “My life, as I know it, is over.”

“Well, until you get better.”

“I guess I’ll just have to make up for it when I can play again.”

“You promise?”

“Sure.”

Wilbur smiled. Tommy knew exactly how to cheer him up. To look past the fact that he wouldn’t be able to create music now and to the future where he would.

He *would* be able to play guitar again. He had to now, he’d promised Tommy and he never broke a promise he made with Tommy.

It caught him off guard when Tommy suddenly started talking again.

“How are you?”

“Huh?” Wilbur tilted his head in confusion. “I just told you-“

“No, not like that! How *are* you? Like, in terms of how you’re feeling.”

“Oh, I’m fine, I guess.”

Wilbur hoped Tommy wouldn’t pick up on the blatant lie.

“*Wil.*”

Okay, Tommy definitely wasn’t buying it.

“I’m better now, after, um, being able to talk and stuff. You have no idea how much I worried that Techno was just beating you up while I was stuck here.

“Phil’s weird, I guess. He’s just being too nice – like impossibly nice – and I know it’s going to be awful when I get out of here and he finally snaps but right now he’s just kind and always sitting beside me.

“I’m not even sure what happens next, or if I need to do scans or how long they’ll keep me and there’s needles-“ Wilbur pointedly did not look at his left hand. It would be cruel to make Tommy watch him spiral into a panic attack. “I- I’m scared,” he finished very, very quietly.

It seemed to catch Tommy off-guard for a moment before he blinked himself back to the present and smiled to Wilbur reassuringly.

“It’s okay to be scared – you always tell me that. You always say that there’s nothing wrong with being afraid and I’d always say that I *wasn’t*, but you know what?”

“What?” Wilbur couldn’t help but smile fondly.

“Sometimes I *am* scared. And- and that’s okay, right?”

“Of course it is.”

“Right! Because it’ll get better. There’s gonna be times where you’re not scared and you’ll be happy and maybe that the thing you were afraid of isn’t actually that scary after all.”

Tommy had turned his head to try and catch a glance at the garden again and Wilbur’s eyebrows knit together inquisitively. After a beat, he couldn’t help but ask. “Are you talking about Techno?”

Tommy jumped at the mention of their foster brother’s name but he didn’t seem scared, just embarrassed.

To his surprise, Tommy gave a little nod, a slight bob of the head and for a moment, Wilbur thought he’d leave it at that.

“He’s not bad, you know? He’s actually really nice.” Tommy smiled slightly and Wilbur felt something painful twist inside of him. It took a second to realise it wasn’t his bruised ribs and was instead a sudden rush of jealousy. He forced the feelings down right away. It was unbelievably selfish to tell Tommy to stay away from someone he grew to like just because Wilbur wanted to keep Tommy to himself.

He didn’t feel threatened when Tommy had introduced him to Tubbo. He’d dragged the shorter kid around and presented him to Wilbur as his new best friend and Wilbur had laughed and thanked Tubbo for putting up with his annoying little brother.

But then again, there wasn’t a violent bone in Tubbo’s body. Tubbo had not growled at them and told them that they did not belong. Tubbo was small and clumsy and did not go around beating kids up.

As far as Wilbur was concerned, unlike Tubbo, Techno was the very definition of ‘dangerous’ and as much as he wanted for Tommy to be able to handle his absence, a tiny, stubborn part of him was afraid of losing Tommy. What if Tommy liked Techno more? What if Tommy had chosen to trust Techno and Techno hurt him?

“I trust you but... be careful.”

“I’m not an idiot,” Tommy rolled his eyes. “But he did help us out back there.”

Tommy was right. Even through the phone screen, Wilbur could tell that Tommy was fine. He had a few plasters covering his forearms but aside from that, he was unharmed and

whether Wilbur liked it or not, Techno was the reason that Tommy was safe. If their foster brother hadn't intervened, Wilbur knew there'd be a very real possibility that Tommy would be laying in a hospital bed beside him. Maybe he'd be hurt a lot worse than Wilbur's sprained wrist and fractured ribs.

He didn't trust Techno, not entirely. They had a fragile truce at best but he had undoubtedly saved Tommy – saved them both from suffering what had the potential to be a more severe beating – that had to count for something.

“Yeah,” Wilbur nodded. He hesitated a second and then met Tommy's eyes again through the screen. “Can you do a favour for me?”

“Sure.”

“In my room, behind the bedframe, there's a keyring – it's got a crown on the end,” Wilbur swallowed around the lump in his throat. “Can you give it to Techno? And can you tell him ‘thanks’ for me?”

~*~

Phil definitely took his time making his way back to Wilbur's bedside. He ambled over slowly but kept his distance so he could avoid hovering over Wilbur's shoulder as he chatted with Tommy. He'd glance over every now and then and sip at the paper takeaway coffee cup in his hand.

Eventually, though, Phil spoke up.

“Wil?”

Wilbur jolted at the sound of his name and immediately turned to look at Phil, noticing the man standing a lot closer than he had realised. Wilbur fought the urge to cringe away, it'd only offend Phil and worry Tommy.

“I'm really sorry, mate, but I think the nurse is on her way to do some check-ups in a minute.” Wilbur was surprised to find that he really did look apologetic.

“Okay.”

He must have been talking to Tommy for about half an hour but it still felt like it was over too quick. Realistically, he knew he couldn't just chat all day but that didn't make saying goodbye any easier.

“You can call again later if you feel up for it,” Phil assured him and though Wilbur nodded and smiled politely, making sure to give Phil his thanks, he knew he'd never be able to ask. Phil had been kind enough to let Wilbur borrow his phone for so long already. Asking to use

it again would seem ungrateful, not to mention that it was likely a terrible inconvenience for Phil and Wilbur knew he had to be on thin ice already.

Still, he didn't dare to voice his thoughts. "Thank you."

Wilbur bid goodbye to Tommy - which was a lot harder than it should have been. Tommy kept trying to keep him talking even when Wilbur noticed his nurse standing in the doorway and tried to tell Tommy he really did have to go. Even then, Tommy insisted Wilbur promise that he'll get out soon and that he'll come straight home. It would have been endearing had Tommy not looked to be actually getting rather emotional about it and ultimately, it was Wilbur who brought himself to hang up the call, but not before promising Tommy that he'd be back in no time.

The nurse was patient and didn't appear to be in a rush to have Wilbur dealt with. She took one look at him and knew right away that he was terrified, though seemed to make a genuine effort to calm him down.

Wilbur was beyond relieved, when she asked if he was okay for her to remove the needle from the back of his hand. He'd even managed to avoid panicking and barely felt it being carefully withdrawn.

She then mentioned having to borrow him for a moment to look at his other injuries. She took the time to assure Wilbur that there was nothing to be worried about and asked if he'd like for Phil to come into the examination room with him.

Wilbur stilled.

He told himself to say 'no' but he couldn't bring himself go through with it.

Even more scary than the hospital itself, was the realisation that Wilbur *did* want Phil there.

Phil had been nice so far. He hadn't hit them, or yelled, or withheld food. He smiled a lot and seemed genuine when he assured Wilbur that he would not hurt him.

While Wilbur had told himself that Phil could not be trusted, he wanted to – he really, really wanted to be able to trust that Phil would not hurt him.

In a building away from his younger brother, where he did not recognise a single person, Phil was the only familiar face he could cling to.

"No, thank you," Wilbur regretted the words even as he said them. "I'll be fine."

Wilbur told himself that he'd done good. That he could get through it on his own, that he would be fine and that he certainly did *not* need Phil.

In fact, Wilbur was able to deny needing Phil up until the unfamiliar machinery and doctors got involved.

They spoke to Wilbur softly, like he was a skittish animal on the verge of bolting for the door and sprinting down the hallway. But no matter how nice they were, Wilbur couldn't help

himself from edging backwards. He looked from the equipment, to the doctors and then finally, to Phil.

The fear in his eyes must have been obvious because that was all it took for Phil to step in.

He spoke to the doctors and explained it as simply as he could to Wilbur who really did not care too much about how the machine worked, aside from if it would hurt. Phil assured him that it wouldn't and as much as Wilbur wanted to doubt him, he had not actually caught Phil in a lie yet.

Like Phil had promised him, the scans of his chest did not hurt. Wilbur shut his eyes through most of it and focused on keeping still, then after a few minutes it was all over and Phil was saying over and over again how well he'd done.

To be honest, it took so much coaxing to get Wilbur to cooperate, he doubted Phil would feel anything but exasperation and dormant anger, but one look at the man said the opposite. He genuinely seemed proud of him and for a second Wilbur couldn't help when he smiled back, indulging in the notion that he *had* actually done well and should be happy with himself too.

~*~

The following day, while Wilbur assured himself that he was fine, there was a lingering worry that sat at the back of his mind. He hesitated when the nurse asked if he'd like Phil to join him, but looked down at the ground and gave a little nod.

Phil didn't seem to mind and Wilbur found the whole ordeal a lot easier to manage than the day prior when everything was still new and terrifying.

The doctor who spoke to Phil assured him that Wilbur was improving and might be able to get out in the next few days if things all went well. Wilbur tried not to get his hopes up.

~*~

By Monday, Wilbur felt brave enough to avoid stalling before being ushered into place. Phil still joined him though and Wilbur was grateful to have someone there to do most of the talking.

Things had gone so smoothly that they had finished up Wilbur's daily check-ups by early afternoon.

On one hand, Wilbur was grateful for not having to lay there in dread waiting to be examined and being told that he was 'doing well' and that the doctors were 'very happy' with how he

was recovering.

But on the other, it left him with very little to do. It was a Monday so Wilbur suspected that Tommy had been sent to school and wouldn't be able to chat with him.

That thought alone was enough to terrify him, after all, what if those kids went after Tommy again? Wilbur wasn't there to look after him and he wasn't naïve enough to actually believe Techno would protect Tommy. It was one thing for Techno to not hurt Tommy while alone at home with him, but it was another altogether to assume he'd actually go out of his way to make sure the kid was safe.

Phil had tried to keep him busy by making small talk and much to Wilbur's disbelief it had been working to an extent.

Phil didn't pry into any of Wilbur's unusual behaviour from earlier and tried to keep the conversation light-hearted. While Wilbur usually couldn't stand having to make idle chatter, he did find himself grateful for the distraction.

Unfortunately though, every so often, Phil's phone would ring and he would look to Wilbur apologetically before excusing himself to handle it.

Wilbur couldn't tell what Phil was saying but he suspected it was likely either his social worker or the school or maybe them both.

He really didn't know which option was worse. The school was likely calling up to let Phil now that his foster kids were suspended or that they wouldn't be welcome back any time soon. In that case, Phil would absolutely get angry with them and in such a situation, Wilbur wasn't sure how much of the blame he could take without Phil getting suspicious.

Though if it was his social worker, Phil was probably already discussing how quickly he could be rid of them both.

Wilbur pointedly told himself he was *not* at all upset about that.

He had certainly not grown to like Phil, even if he'd been leagues better than any other family he had been put with in the past. Techno was terrifying and strong but he'd also stuck up for them, when Wilbur was convinced they were completely and utterly alone.

Leaving this home behind would undoubtably be hard. Harder still, would be having to say goodbye to Tommy. He was under no illusion that once Phil was done with them, they'd end up at separate houses. This family really was their last chance at staying together and Wilbur couldn't help but wish it had gone differently.

Maybe if they'd taken a different route to the bus stop, or managed to tag along with a group of friends so they wouldn't be targeted.

Wilbur wasn't quite sure Tubbo would be enough to keep the kids away. As much as he liked the kid, he was smaller than Tommy and really didn't look remotely intimidating.

The better option would have been to find George and beg for the chance to walk out the door with him. He was older and known to be very good friends with Dream. With any luck that association alone would be enough to keep Wilbur and Tommy out of harm's way, or if it failed, maybe Dream would be open to extending his protection towards Tommy if Wilbur could find something he wanted.

Bargaining for Tommy's safety would absolutely be worth it, even though Wilbur had no idea how much Dream would want for that sort of deal. He'd find a way, though. For Tommy, he would make sure to find a way.

After a few minutes on the phone, Phil would return and smile to him, apologising for the interruption and asking where they were. It was subtle, but Wilbur caught the slight tension in his jaw and the way he seemed almost preoccupied with something else.

Wilbur didn't mention it and Phil didn't elaborate.

It was shortly after lunch that Wilbur received the good news that he was to be kept overnight again but should be discharged the following day.

Wilbur told himself not to get his hopes up, that what the nurse said was not a guarantee, but Phil seemed optimistic and it was hard for that hopeful feeling not to rub off on him too.

It was that little flicker of hope which Wilbur felt like a premonition. It was common that after small moments of happiness that something terrible would follow and Wilbur could do nothing but lay there in anticipation.

As the sun dropped below the horizon, the sense of dread still hung over Wilbur like dark clouds and he found himself clinging to the thin blankets of his hospital bed like it would keep him safe from the storm to follow.

It was clear from the way Phil seemed to keep blinking himself awake and intermittent yawns that the man was tired. When he asked if Wilbur felt like getting some rest, Wilbur nodded and replied, "yes," despite not feeling at all sleepy.

Wilbur lay back and kept very still. He closed his eyes but would sneak glances at Phil every now and then, watching as the man fell asleep.

It didn't take long. As soon as Phil's eyes slid shut, he had slumped to one side in his chair. Wilbur saw the steady rise and fall of his chest and heard the slight rumble of snores and in that moment Phil didn't look all that scary, leaving Wilbur to wonder just why he was so afraid of the man in the first place.

Wilbur knew the feeling wouldn't last. Whatever sense of safety he felt was fleeting and would be gone by the time he woke up.

It was with a sigh of resignation that Wilbur let his eyes close and he tried to grasp the feeling of temporary serenity, wrestle with it, force it closer until he succumbed to sleep.

“*I’m sorry!*” The words were route. They came without Wilbur having to think – an automatic response and the result of instinct.

Don’t fight back. Wait for it to be over.

Wilbur didn’t use his arms to cover his head and shield himself from the blows.

He knew it made his foster father angry and when he had a lot to drink, he was particularly brutal.

Wilbur felt the heel of a boot collide against his stomach, winding him. He didn’t register the force of it sending him sliding across the kitchen floor, just the way his body slammed against the wall.

Wilbur tried to catch his breath but it was becoming difficult and he fought to remain conscious through the dark spots in his vision. He could feel a sharp stinging in the back of his head, where it had hit the hard edge of the doorframe.

No, no, no. He couldn’t pass out now. If Tommy found him unconscious the kid would assume the worst. He had to stay awake – *he had to*.

With shaking fingers Wilbur reached up to touch the back of his head, he felt something hot and wet and knew without having to take his hand away that it was the signature sticky texture of blood.

“Get up.”

Wilbur felt the words like a bolt of electricity through his body.

He scrambled, tried to right himself, feeling nauseous at the red coating his fingertips as he braced them on the floor to push himself up.

His arms gave out and he landed hard onto his chest. Wilbur bit back a whimper and tried again.

He did not risk looking up at his foster father. The man did not like eye contact – something about it being insubordinate, Wilbur didn’t remember. He had been at this home long enough to know that he did not need to see his foster father’s eyes to sense his anger and impatience.

Get up, he told himself. *Be good*.

Wilbur had managed to get to his knees before the next blow came.

He wasn’t sure what had hit him, only that it caused a throbbing in his jaw as he coughed up a mixture of blood and spit onto the floor.

He grimaced. Blood was a stubborn stain and Wilbur knew that he'd have to clean up his mess at some point when his punishment was over.

He breathed even though his lungs hurt, forced himself to take another deep breath, as he tried to get to his feet.

Wilbur staggered, saw the world shift around him as he fell, once again.

He heard a groan of annoyance and flinched away, ignoring the way his entire body trembled as he tried to correct his mistake. He pushed himself off of the floor only for a boot to slam down against his back.

Wilbur yelped, landing beside the mess of blood and saliva. The smell hit him all at once, something coppery and metallic and he tried to move away only to find his body uncooperative.

Wilbur trembled, he knew after going down that final time, he would not be able to get up again.

The world around him was blurry and as much as he wanted to obey, so the nightmare could end and he'd wake to Tommy's hands dabbing a wet cloth against the patches of skin mottled with dark bruises, Wilbur knew he had to hang on just a little while longer.

"Don't tell me you're tired."

The voice was mocking and Wilbur ignored the prick of tears at the corner of his eyes.

He shook his head quickly, squeezing his eyes shut.

"That's good because now is not the time to go to sleep. You know when else isn't the time to go to sleep?"

Wilbur cried out as he felt the boot apply pressure, grinding it's heel down into his back.

"The middle of fucking class."

Wilbur nodded with his cheek still pressed against the cold tile of the kitchen floor.

"You don't fucking learn, do you?"

Wilbur gasped, as the boot was removed, grateful for the short reprieve. Instinctually, his body curled inwards, stomach still tender from where it had been struck earlier.

There was a moment of terrible silence, then Wilbur felt the man's hand in his hair, clutching at the strands and yanking his head upwards.

"I asked you a question."

Wilbur could almost taste the acidity of the alcohol from his foster father's breath and fought the urge to gag.

He shook his head, fixing his eyes on the man's chin, not daring to meet his stare, terrified of the rage he'd find there as well as the consequential punishment.

"No," he managed to choke out.

"No, *what*," he gave Wilbur's head a shake and the dark spots returned.

It took Wilbur a few seconds to process the question before his mind caught up to him.

"No, sir!"

He was unceremoniously dropped back down, where he lay in a crumped heap on the floor, the sound of his heartbeat in his ears.

Wilbur watched his foster father pace the length of the kitchen, moving back and forth as his shoes crossed Wilbur's vision.

He was muttering something that Wilbur couldn't quite hear, sounding way too coherent in his thoughts for a man who had downed as much alcohol as he had.

"Do you have any idea how it'll look when your grades drop again?"

Wilbur wasn't given a chance to answer.

"*We* will get the blame for that," he gestured vaguely down the hall, where Wilbur was sure his foster mother had shut herself away from the noise. The man sighed and shook his head, rambling under his breath as he paced. "That fucking brat is a lost cause—" he broke off, staring at a spot on the wall as something cold and distant passed over his eyes.

When he turned his attention back to Wilbur, he had to fight his body to keep from trembling. There was something he hated in the way his foster father looked down at him.

Wilbur lay there motionless, eyes blown wide as he sat frozen in terror.

He had been on the receiving end of punishments before but they had never been this bad. Wilbur had never actually had to grapple with the fear that he might not actually make it out of one alive.

Belatedly, he remembered the rule about eye contact and ducked his head, forcing himself to stare at his own blood on the floor in front of him as he waited.

There was a moment of tense silence, then his foster father left the room.

Wilbur breathed a very quiet sigh of relief as he heard the footsteps retreat down the hallway.

Was he done?

Seconds ago, Wilbur was sure the man was ready to kill him, but he had just walked away. He was surprised to not even receive one final kick to the abdomen, as his foster father passed by.

The sound of heavy boots could still be heard on the stairs but Wilbur allowed himself to collapse against the floor. He was far away enough to not be an immediate threat, which meant that, as far as Wilbur was concerned, he'd likely had enough.

His body ached and as much as he wanted to muster the strength to crawl to the bedroom he shared with Tommy, he knew he wouldn't make it. The best option would be to wait until night fell and Tommy would be able to creep downstairs to sling one of Wilbur's arms over his shoulders and help him up to their room.

All Wilbur had to do was be patient, though with the thundering of his foster father's footsteps upstairs, Wilbur resigned himself to a long wait.

Tommy knew better than to risk coming out of hiding until it was safe to do so - Wilbur had made *sure* he knew that.

Wilbur flinched at the slamming of doors, followed by loud curses that seemed to echo off the walls of the house. The way his foster father moved was incessant, like he was looking for something and Wilbur's blood ran cold at the realisation.

He heard a scream. He heard *Tommy* scream.

No.

He was *safe*. Wilbur *promised* to keep him safe.

But there was more incoherent shouting and as much as Wilbur wanted to deny what he was hearing, he knew that he'd recognise his little brother's voice anywhere.

He tried to get up – he really did – but his legs gave out almost immediately and he fell with a frustrated yell.

Wilbur tried to drag himself across the floor.

He had no idea how he was getting up the stairs. He had no idea how he could possibly help. But his body ran on autopilot as he moved, resolving himself to the fact that he'd do whatever he had to in order to protect that kid.

He didn't get very far but for better or for worse, they seemed to be coming to him.

There was a clatter on the stairs and then in a blur of motion, Tommy ran into the kitchen.

He stopped dead in his tracks at the sight of Wilbur.

Tommy's eyes were wet with unshed tears, bright blue and terrified as he looked down at his older brother.

"Run," Wilbur yelled at him, nodding towards the back door. *"Just go!"*

He could see the conflict on the kid's face but there must have been something in Wilbur's voice that left no room for debate as Tommy only nodded sharply and bolted.

For a wonderful moment of pure relief, Wilbur had thought he'd made it, only to notice that their foster father had closed the distance and was yanking Tommy back.

Tommy cried out and Wilbur screamed, though his voice didn't reach his ears.

The world was moving so slowly but way too quick at the same time. Wilbur wouldn't keep up but also found that every little detail stood out. From the awful pallor of Tommy's face, to the pure, unadulterated fear in his eyes as he looked to Wilbur.

"*Wilbur!*"

He struggled forward on his front, crawling with a newfound desperation, only to be kicked away immediately.

Wilbur felt the room turn in a blur of colour and he fought back the urge to throw up.

Tommy whimpered in their foster father's hold and Wilbur managed to roll himself over to glare up at the man.

"Don't you fucking touch him," he snarled through the blood in his mouth and throbbing pain in his jaw. "Leave him *alone*."

From the look on his foster father's face, the threat didn't land. He knew he must have looked pathetic. Sprawled out on the floor, bleeding and covered in bruises, but with renewed defiance.

He was reminded of just who he was fighting for – the reason he bled and went hungry and lived in a constant state of worry.

He was reminded of Tommy and absolutely no one got away with hurting his little brother.

In a final burst of energy, Wilbur lunged.

He tried to aim for areas that were sensitive. The places on his body Wilbur knew from experience hurt. It was difficult to get a hit in with Tommy struggling in his grasp but Wilbur attacked in a frenzy. He was growling, throwing punches, missing his mark nearly every time until he felt his fist strike the man's shoulder.

He staggered back slightly but didn't let go of Tommy. Instead, he shoved Wilbur off of him embarrassingly easily and it left Wilbur burdened with the terrifying realisation that he could do nothing.

He was weak. His body had given up on him. He did not stand a chance against a man the size of his foster father.

He'd exhausted every other option, all he had left was begging for mercy.

"*Please*," Wilbur sobbed. "Please, *no*."

“I think you need some incentive to try a little harder, don’t you?” He shook Tommy for emphasis and the kid wailed in fear.

“*Please!* I’ll be good! You don’t have to hurt him- *please-*“

He heard a crack and saw Tommy’s body jolt behind the force of the blow. It was the first of many that followed.

Tommy screamed the entire time as Wilbur crawled forward, trying feebly to wrestle Tommy free only to be beaten down every time.

He did not give up. He cried and begged and struggled towards his brother again and again until his foster father had grown bored and released his hold on Tommy, letting his body drop.

Wilbur was there to catch him and as soon as he had the kid in his arms, he curled around him, using his body as a makeshift shield even though he knew it was over. There was nothing left to do but nurse their wounds and take whatever solace they could find in the quiet aftermath.

~*~

The first thing Wilbur saw when he opened his eyes was blonde hair and he lurched forwards, followed by a desperate cry of “*Tommy,*” as he grabbed at the figure in front of him.

It was always like this.

Wilbur would wake with a jolt, falling into Tommy’s waiting arms, desperate for reassurances that his little brother was safe, that he hadn’t failed him again, that he wasn’t the reason Tommy got hurt.

Wilbur’s entire body shook as silent tears ran down his cheeks, streaking his face and wetting Tommy’s shirt.

He felt arms encircle him, undeterred by his loud, gasping breaths or the way he trembled.

Wilbur heard a voice, it was gentle and soothing – not quite a whisper but low enough to be comforting. He recognised it. It was-

He stilled.

It wasn’t Tommy...

Wilbur felt the sinking feeling of dread crash over him like a wave.

He opened his mouth; shut it again, like he was floundering and gasping for air.

“Wil? Wilbur, are you okay?”

It was Phil.

Wilbur’s fingers felt numb where they had clutched at Phil’s shirt with his good hand but he forced himself to let go, falling back onto the bed and biting his lip to stifle the whimper that forced its way up his throat.

He wanted to look up at Phil, to figure out just how angry he was at having been woken up and grabbed by Wilbur in the midst of startling himself awake, but there was an instinctive fear that kept his eyes trained on Phil’s chest. It was as far as he’d dared in case Phil thought he was testing his luck by challenging authority after doing wrong.

He knew the rules. He wouldn’t let Tommy suffer because of him ever again.

“Mate? Can you hear me?”

He’d been asked a direct question.

“Yes, sir,” Wilbur’s voice broke and he nodded tightly. He could feel the rising emotion and the tears that threatened to spill.

Phil didn’t say anything and the silence that dragged on between them felt like an eternity.

When it started to feel suffocating, Wilbur counted backwards from 10 in his head and then raised his head to look at Phil.

Phil sat there frozen, taken aback but also scared in a way Wilbur had never seen before. His mouth hung open, as if unsure what to say while he stared across at Wilbur huddled on the hospital bed. The man’s body was tense and it took Wilbur a second to release that he looked uncomfortable, like he was having to face a painful reality he did not like the look of.

It was almost like looking in a mirror. Wilbur knew the feelings well but seeing them on somebody else’s face – seeing them on Phil’s face – felt somewhat uncanny.

The very notion was almost laughable. Phil was the *adult*. He had no reason to look so worried and certainly not about Wilbur of all people.

“What did they do to you?” Phil muttered to himself but in the quiet of the hospital, Wilbur heard the question clearly.

He shrank back and it snapped Phil out of whatever daze he was caught in and the man shook his head. “Sorry. That was a lot- I-“ he huffed in frustration, seemingly unable to gather his thoughts but when he met Wilbur’s frightened stare, his eyes softened. “Nightmare?”

Wilbur nodded his head.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

Wilbur’s reaction was instant. “Please, no! I can’t-“

“It’s okay, don’t worry. You don’t have to if you don’t want to.”

“It- I- I’m-“ Wilbur gasped, used his left hand to rub at his throat where it felt tight.

“Take a deep breath for me – remember how we did before? Like this-“ Phil breathed in deeply and Wilbur took the cue to follow his lead.

Wilbur caught on a lot quicker than last time but it was clear that Phil looked to be on edge, as if he had no idea how to proceed.

“You, um, you called me ‘sir’ for a second there...” Phil spoke quietly, careful to keep his tone light. He looked away from Wilbur but seemed as though he was watching him closely out of the corner of his eye, trying to gauge how likely Wilbur was to bolting out of the bed and making for the door.

“I did?”

“Yeah, mate.”

“Oh.”

“Is...” Phil trailed off before finding the nerve to speak again. “Is there a reason for that?”

Wilbur blinked but otherwise didn’t react.

“You haven’t exactly said it before and maybe if there was a reason why...” Phil sighed. “It’s just that I’ve always been ‘Phil’.”

Wilbur seemed to mull over the words for a moment, then spoke very quietly. “I got confused,” he paused for a moment, then hastily added, “Phil,” almost as an afterthought but it also sounded like something of an affirmation.

For some reason the difference between past and present felt blurry and Wilbur had to convince himself that he *was* talking to Phil and not another adult from his past who still lived on inside Wilbur’s head long after he’d moved out of their house.

“When you woke up just now, did you think that I’d hurt you?”

Wilbur inhaled sharply but let the silence sit between them.

“*Do* you think I’ll hurt you?”

The pause dragged on once more and as Phil reached the conclusion that he likely wasn’t going to get an answer at all, Wilbur whispered into the space between them.

“Yes.”

“Oh, Wilbur,” he heard Phil say his name, then noticed the man’s hand come towards him.

Wilbur didn't move away, he squeezed his eyes shut and resigned himself to the backhand he was sure would come.

The hand didn't land and after a few seconds sitting in anticipation, Wilbur opened his eyes to notice Phil seem to think better of touching him and let his hand fall to his side.

"I'm not going to hurt you – I would *never* hurt you."

"But I- I'm in trouble."

"No," Phil said firmly. "You aren't. You haven't done anything wrong."

Oh.

Oh shit.

Phil must have thought the fight was Tommy's fault. He was probably treating Wilbur so well because he'd assumed Tommy was the one who had started it and Wilbur was dragged along as his brother.

It was easy to get angry with Tommy. He was loud, spoke back to foster parents and always tried to sneak more than was allowed onto his plate.

Hell, even *Wilbur* got angry with Tommy on occasion but never to the point where their bond was irreversibly damaged. Like siblings they fought and like siblings they made up afterwards.

Tommy didn't mean to cause trouble for their foster parents – he never meant it; he was just a kid – but they never saw it that way. That's why Wilbur had to play mediator. Why he had to talk their way out of impossible situations. Why he had to beg, plead and reason for their innocence.

It worked sometimes.

And the times where it didn't, Wilbur was ready to step in and protect him with whatever means necessary.

It worked sometimes.

Despite everything, Tommy was usually the one who shouldered the blame for their actions, even when he'd done nothing wrong – *especially* when it was Wilbur who had fucked up.

People who knew of Tommy had labelled him a 'problem child'. He was the perfect scapegoat.

"It was my fault!" Wilbur spoke so quickly the worlds ran together and Phil seemed to have trouble picking up just what Wilbur had said.

"I'm sorry?"

“It was me! All of it was me! I was the one they were targeting, Tommy just wanted to stick up for me. None of it was his fault, so- so you don’t have to punish him. It’s *me* you should be angry at, not Tommy – never-“

“Woah, slow down there a second, okay?”

Wilbur cut himself off abruptly.

“Calm down, you’re okay.”

Phil’s words did little to ease any of Wilbur’s panic.

“I’ll be good! I won’t run away or fight back!”

“*What-*“ Phil looked horrified.

“Please, sir – *Phil* – fuck!” The anger in Wilbur’s voice left as soon as it appeared and the outburst sent him straight back to shaking in a small huddle on the bed. “*Sorry!* I’m so, so sorry. I meant to say Phil, I swear, I just-“

Stop it, you’re embarrassing yourself!

You’re not *there* anymore.

Wilbur knew that house was behind him but for some reason his mind was convinced otherwise. He couldn’t tell the difference between Phil and other, less *lenient* families he’d stayed with in the past.

“Tommy is not going to be hurt. I promise. That’s not okay, Wilbur. If somebody hits you- or- or they try to justify hitting you, that is *never* okay. That’s abuse and if it ever happens, you need to tell me and I promise I will keep you safe.

“You don’t ever have to worry about that ever again. Techno and I will look after you – both of you.”

“Techno...” Wilbur looked away quickly. “Techno doesn’t like us.”

“Of course he does,” Phil gave a fond smile and seemed to look past Wilbur, at something that wasn’t quite there. It felt almost like he could see something Wilbur couldn’t just yet. “He’s just scared of change. He’s a bit wary around new people but I think all of us can be a bit like that at times.”

Which Wilbur felt was a very mild way of putting it. Techno seemed a bit more than wary of Tommy and Wilbur, but then again, Wilbur knew that he’d been quick to judge Techno as soon as they’d met too. Maybe if Tommy had warmed to him, he wasn’t all that bad.

For the first time since Tommy had set that honey-coloured guitar in his lap, Wilbur felt hopeful, like there was a light at the end of the tunnel if he just looked hard enough.

It was scary to trust Phil, especially when it went against Wilbur's every instinct. He wanted to be able to fake a smile and promise Phil that he wouldn't be any more trouble from here on out but Wilbur was so, so tired.

That tiny light felt bright and all-encompassing and stung his eyes but left his body feeling light, like a weight had been lifted from his shoulders. Wilbur rubbed at his eyes only to realise he was crying again.

Why couldn't he let himself feel happy? Why was he making Phil put up with him crying *again*?

Wilbur heard Phil say his name softly and before he realised what was happening he felt arms wrap around him.

His mind went straight to Tommy. The kid was the only one Wilbur ever let get close to hugging him and it was Tommy's hands that patched him up after he got hurt.

Then, upon realising that Phil was the one hugging him, Wilbur sat for a moment, unable to figure out how he felt. He heard his heart beat again, then again, then again and Wilbur very cautiously leaned into the touch.

Phil held Wilbur against his chest and he was grateful for the fact that he couldn't see the man's face.

One of Phil's hands cradled the back of Wilbur's head as his body shook violently but Phil held him through it all, absentmindedly rubbing soothingly at Wilbur's hair. The touch was so gentle Wilbur didn't even realise it at first, just felt himself relax, but as soon as he registered the fingers in his hair, he tensed. He braced himself, waiting for the moment they would abandon their feather-light scratching and curl into a fist, yanking his head upwards.

Wilbur held his breath and waited and waited and waited.

"Oh, I'm sorry," Phil said softly but withdrew his hand entirely, sitting back to give Wilbur a chance to retreat. "Techno finds people playing with his hair relaxing, I wasn't thinking and didn't realise that might not be something you'd like."

To Wilbur's surprise, he whined at the loss of touch and then immediately flushed, curling in on himself, wondering just when he'd become so clingy.

He wanted to stay there, to curl up into a ball on his side and pretend like he didn't need to be hugged in order to calm himself down until he felt safe enough to sleep again.

But he was exhausted.

He was tired of feeling so trapped, so scared, so utterly helpless.

Wilbur looked up to meet Phil's eyes. He swallowed even though his throat felt dry and the heart rate monitor to his bedside sped up again.

For a moment, Wilbur thought he couldn't go through with it, that he'd sooner work himself into a panic than manage to get another word out of his mouth.

"You won't pull it, will you?"

Phil's brows knit together in confusion. "I'm sorry, I'm not too sure what you mean."

Wilbur sucked in a deep breath. "My hair – you won't, um, pull my hair if I- when you- before-"

Phil looked genuinely, sincerely sad. "No, Wilbur, I would *never* pull your hair."

On some level Wilbur knew he would say that, because he was *Phil* and for some reason Phil just couldn't bring himself to be like the other adults in Wilbur's life and shatter the fragile trust Wilbur placed in him.

"Okay," Wilbur awkwardly shuffled closer.

Phil didn't move. He did not wrap his arms around him, or mutter reassurances, he simply let Wilbur decide what he wanted - not that Wilbur, himself, really knew.

Wilbur sat beside Phil and in the darkness of the hospital room, it was hard to tell what the man was thinking. Wilbur lingered for a moment, steeled himself, and then let his head drop back against Phil's chest.

"You can, um, you can – you know, hug me – if you want."

It was bolder than Wilbur had ever dared to be.

He knew better than to ask for affection, especially when it was so easy for a touch to turn from caring to cruel at a moment's notice, but Wilbur really wanted to be held and he really wanted to be able to trust Phil.

"Is that what *you* want?"

"I don't mind."

"I'm not going to hug you if you don't want me to, mate."

"If-" Wilbur stopped. They were getting nowhere, passing assent back and forth. Phil wasn't going to move until he was sure it's what Wilbur wanted, but asking was always the hardest part.

Wilbur nodded, steeled himself and whispered. "Yes."

Slowly, as to not startle him, Phil wrapped his arms around Wilbur once again.

It was more comforting than it had any right being, coming from an adult Wilbur was only beginning to trust, but it was refreshing after feeling afraid for so long and Wilbur sighed contentedly.

“Is this okay?” Phil muttered into Wilbur’s hair as he looked down at him.

“Mhmm.”

“You know,” Wilbur blinked up at Phil as he spoke. “Of course I love Techno but that doesn’t mean I care about you or Tommy any less.”

“But he’s your kid.”

“He is, but I’m able to care about more than one of you at a time. Just because I’ve adopted Techno doesn’t make you or Tommy or any less important.”

It shouldn’t make sense, Wilbur thought. Phil shouldn’t be able to look at the 3 of them and divide that warmth between them equally but it seemed as though he could.

Phil had a son back home and it was obvious for anyone who spent more than a few minutes with them that Phil loved Techno more than anything.

It felt strange to think that Phil could care about two more kids that much – especially when loving Wilbur and Tommy meant having to shoulder their emotional baggage with them. But Wilbur took one look at Phil and knew he meant it. That thought alone left him dizzyingly happy and scared all at once.

He could not remember ever *wanting* to go back to a foster house but this one felt different in a way Wilbur couldn’t put into words. He knew it wouldn’t be permanent, but it was a temporary reprieve and an unusual stroke of good luck Wilbur would not squander.

“Do you want to try getting some more sleep?”

Wilbur blinked himself awake, completely unaware he’d even shut his eyes.

He looked at Phil like he was going to lose him and his silent desperation seemed to speak volumes.

Wilbur knew he’d be moved onto a different home at some point. He knew this – accepted it, even, but closing his eyes felt final. Like the end had already crept up on him before he even had the time to appreciate this little family and it was lost forever.

“It’s okay, I’ll still be here when you wake up.”

To Wilbur’s surprise, he believed him. Finding that the words alone were enough to calm the beating of his heart as he nodded and settled back down against the pillows, allowing Phil to pull the duvet up to his chin. When Phil tried to draw back his hand, Wilbur seized it in his own.

It took Wilbur a moment to realise what he’d done and promptly released his hold, turning away in embarrassment.

“Sorry.”

“It’s okay,” Phil smiled and offered his hand again. “Here.”

Wilbur took it and didn’t let go.

“Night, Wilbur.”

Phil whispered to him as he shut his eyes once more. Another reminder that he was safe. That he wasn’t alone.

Wilbur squeezed the hand he held in his own.

“Goodnight, Phil.”

~*~

When Wilbur woke the next morning, Phil had not withdrawn his hand.

He lay bent over awkwardly in the chair at Wilbur’s bedside in a way which could not have been at all comfortable.

Wilbur couldn’t help the smile that tugged at the corner of his lips.

It was real. It hadn’t been a dream or a vivid imagination fabricated by his own mind to pretend like he had an adult in his life who actually wanted to help him.

Wilbur shifted slightly and tried to stretch without irritating his ribs too much. Despite being careful, they still ached and he hissed in pain.

That seemed to be what woke Phil up. The man blinked against the sunlight pouring in through the far window. He looked around and brightened at the sight of Wilbur.

“Morning! Have you been awake for long?”

“No, I just woke up.”

Phil nodded. He still hadn’t pulled his hand away. “Next time if I’m asleep, just give me a poke. I won’t ever be angry with you waking me up.”

“Okay.”

Wilbur was grateful for the clarification. He did know that Phil wouldn’t be angry but hearing it from the man himself was reassuring nonetheless.

Eventually, when Wilbur’s breakfast was brought round, he had to let go of Phil’s hand to eat it and Phil spoke enough to fill the silence for both of them while Wilbur had his mouth full.

“- Techno’s favourite bookshop is on the corner. He won’t let me walk past unless we look inside.

“Last time, the only way I could get him out was by promising that we’d be able to walk around the museum for a bit before going home.”

Wilbur clung to the mention of a museum. It’d been so long since he’d been able to visit one. He could remember school trips where he’d been desperate to split from his tour group and take everything in at his own pace without having to worry about rowdy kids more interested in ignoring the exhibits than learning anything.

“He’d probably never tell you but he’s really interested in history – ancient Greece and all that. It *might* have something to do with getting him invested in Greek mythology a few years ago.”

Phil looked up and noticed the way Wilbur seemed rapt by the light conversation but looked unsure whether to say anything.

“Do you like the museum?”

This time Wilbur didn’t bother to hide his excitement.

“Yeah, it’s great! I really like history, it’s not exactly Tommy’s thing though.”

Maybe, if Wilbur asked, they’d bring him too next time. For as terrifying as Techno was, he had to beat the kids he’d been to school with – at the very least he was quieter than they were.

“If you want, you can definitely come with us next time – Techno would love someone to talk to. I was never that good at history.” Wilbur blinked in surprise. It was like Phil had read his mind. “Don’t worry about Tommy, I’m sure we can find something he’d like too – maybe mini golf? He’d probably enjoy getting out of the house and having somewhere he can run around for a bit.”

Phil didn’t sound at all annoyed at a kid with Tommy’s level of energy, or the fact that he and Wilbur seemed to enjoy different things. Despite it all, he actually seemed happy to be finally learning about them in a way Wilbur would have found terrifying the day prior.

“Yeah, that sounds good.”

~*~

Around lunchtime, Wilbur was looked over once more and then discharged a full day sooner than expected.

Stepping outside after being stuck indoors for days on end was a welcome change, even if it was just to walk across the parking lot to Phil's car.

"We're some way from home," Phil began, opening the car door for Wilbur so he could settle into the passenger seat. "It's a long drive, so we can stop off somewhere along the way if you need a break."

"It's okay," Wilbur shook his head. He thought of Tommy. The distance from his brother was starting to hurt and he had a promise to keep. "We can go straight there."

Phil slid into the passenger seat and started the engine with a hum of affirmation.

He reached for the radio, turned the volume up and if he noticed Wilbur quietly singing beside him, he didn't mention it.

End Notes

I still can't decide if I like this or not. I might rewrite it at some point but I just hate it sitting in my drafts.

To be honest, the only reason it's up is because I promised that it would be posted and so many people really liked Wilbur's character from the main fic so here we are XD

I've got one more oneshot after this which will serve as an epilogue and then after that I think I'm done with this AU and can move onto some other sbi fics that I am really excited to write!

(Obligatory Tumblr plug! Any new fics I post will be linked from [here](#) in case you wanna follow my work)

Anyway, thank you all again so much for reading and putting up with my long, rambling author's notes - see you guys in the final part :D

Please [drop by the Archive and comment](#) to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!